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# THE SECRET OF WOLD HALL

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

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**THE SECRET OF WOLD HALL**



# THE SECRET OF WOLD HALL

BY

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

AUTHOR OF "NAMESAKES," "THE SILVER AXE"

"MISS MARJORIE OF SILVERMEAD," ETC.



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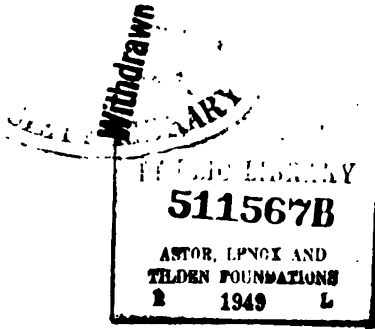
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# THE SECRET OF WOLD HALL

## CHAPTER I

### BOY AND GIRL

THE boy was swinging down the steep mule-track, whistling as he went. He had a knapsack on his back, and an alpenstock in his hand, with sundry names branded spiral fashion upon it, at which he occasionally glanced with a sense of satisfaction and pride. He wore rough tweed clothes and leather gaiters, and for the sake of comfort had taken off his collar and stuffed it into his pocket, leaving his bronzed throat and neck exposed to view. He was bareheaded, too, and the closely curling hair, which had grown a little wild during this walking tour, was of the colour of a ripe chestnut, as were also the thick brows, which met almost in an unbroken line over the rather deep-set eyes. These eyes, too, were of very much the same tint as the hair—a ruddy brown, with an almost golden gleam in their depths,



## The Secret of Wold Hall

His rather square face was ruddy brown also, deeply tanned by sun and wind and the glare of sunlit snow. His clothes and gaiters were likewise brown, and his big strong hands almost the tint of mahogany.

He was sixteen that summer, but might have passed for older. He was not specially tall for his age, but his figure was very strongly knit, well-proportioned, and well set-up. Power rather than grace was what characterised his movements; yet these did not lack for agility, as the boy swung himself from zigzag to zigzag, continually leaving the safety of the mule-track for the more hazardous descent by a short cut. If he had not been bred a Swiss mountaineer (which his emphatically British aspect denied), he must have been well used to rough scrambling in hilly districts, or he could never have acquired that sureness of foot, or quickness of eye, or cool judgment as to exactly the right course to pursue, with no one near to guide or direct.

So much for the boy.

The girl lay, a little white tumbled heap, at the foot of a miniature precipice along which the mule-track skirted at one point. Her cloud of dusky hair fell over her shoulders; her little white frock was torn and stained. One tiny silk-stockinged foot was sadly swollen and twisted, and sobs of pain and fear were shaking the whole childish frame. The little cut hands still grasped some white blossoms, which she fondly believed to be the edelweiss of which she had heard so much. Even in her perilous fall she had not let these go, though they were now crushed

and bruised and battered—like the little ten-year-old maiden herself. Her big dark eyes were full of tears as she suddenly lifted her head to listen. She had been lying there what seemed to her an eternity; and she began to despair of ever being found.

But surely that was a step—that was a whistle! Yes, and she knew the tune too—an English one—the barrel organs in the streets had been playing it all that season. A thrill of hope and joy ran through her; she raised her voice and cried:

“Help! Help! Help!”

The whistle stopped. She seemed to hear steps right overhead. Then a voice called down to her over the projecting edge:

“Anybody down there?”

“Yes, yes—I’m down here. I was reaching for flowers—I fell. You’ll have to get a rope, please. If you go to the hotel at the bottom they’ll give you one. It’s a great big precipice. You can’t get down to me without a rope. Oh!”

For before she had finished her charge, behold! somebody was clambering down to her—like a fly on the wall, as it seemed; or one of the mountain chamois she had watched through the telescope sometimes. Next minute a tall brown boy was bending over her, looking at the swollen foot, and suddenly producing a great knife from his pocket.

“I say, I must cut that boot off; it must be hurting you awfully. Your foot’s swelling twenty to the dozen!”

## The Secret of Wold Ball

The child shrank, and would have cried out to him not to touch that foot, whatever he did. But somehow he had it in his strong hands before she could speak the word, and the next instant the compressing boot was deftly cut off, and the swollen member released from the agonising pressure. In another minute the boy had whipped out a large, though not over-clean handkerchief from his pocket, and dipping it in a pool of water gathered in a cleft in the rocks, had bound up the aching, burning foot and ankle in its cold, wet folds, whereat the astonished but grateful little patient uttered an inarticulate exclamation of relief.

"That'll be a deal more comfortable, you bet," said the boy, who spoke in a curious, rough sort of way, quite unfamiliar to the ears of the dainty little lady. "Fellows do that sort of thing to themselves at football, you know. I've had an ankle like that myself. I know what it feels like. But, I say, how do you come to be here all by yourself? You didn't ought to be here alone in a place like this."

A light had sprung into the child's eyes—the light of defiance, of mischief, of a great resolve.

"I ran away!" she cried. "I knew they wouldn't let me go alone. I wanted some edelweiss—not to buy it, you know, but to find it myself. It's almost our last day. I watched my chance, and I ran away. I ran up here. I knew the edelweiss grew high, high up. I've got it too. Look there. I fell over getting it; but I've got it safe."

She opened her hand and showed her treasure,

bruised and battered as it was. Words sprang to the boy's lips before he thought to hold them back; and perhaps he never would have thought. After all, somebody else would tell her.

"You don't call that stuff edelweiss, do you? Why, that's only one of the saxifrages that grow all over the shop here. Edelweiss is quite another pair of shoes. You don't get that till close to the snow, and then it's scarce enough, except in the right places. Hold on a bit! I've got some in my pack here. I'll give you a piece, and show you the difference."

The tears had almost started again. The shock of disappointment had been cruel—and had come so sharply. But already the boy was opening his knapsack, and she saw that it contained a good-sized specimen tin, such as naturalists carry with them for their spoil. But who would have expected this brown boy to have one?

"Here you are!" he cried, diving among his collection; "now you can see the difference, can't you?" and he began pointing out the special structure of that delicate denizen of ice and snow, till the child forgot her disappointment in her own blunder, forgot her aching foot, forgot everything but the new wonderland opened out before her eyes, as this brown boy pointed out thing after thing, specimen after specimen in his collection, telling her where each had been found, what were its characteristics, and what adventures he had met with in the gathering.

How time fled she did not know or think. It was the boy who suddenly jumped up, crying :

"Holy Moses! but you've no business to be stopping out here all this time, with your foot swelling up like a pumpkin, and your people perhaps in a jolly old stew about you! Here, you catch hold of that bit of edelweiss. You can keep that for yourself. I'll just put the rest of this stuff away; and then we must see about getting you back home, wherever that is."

"Oh, I don't think we can do that," answered the little girl. "I think I shall have to stop here till they come with ropes and things. If you would go and tell them, Brown Boy; I'll wait here till you come back."

She spoke bravely, but the corners of her sensitive lips twitched. It was very desolate all alone out here. She had not minded it after the boy came; but if he were to go—

"How far off is this precious hotel of yours?"

"Oh, rather a long way; but the mule-path leads down to it. And perhaps they will send people out to look for me."

"Yes; and who ever heard of a search party taking the right direction? They'll scour every place but this one, you'll see. And look at those great clouds coming up! It'll thunder before long, and if the rain comes, you'll be soused through in about two twos. No, there's only one thing to do. You must get on my back, and I'll scramble up to the path with you; and once there we will be as right as a trivet. I can

carry you ; or perhaps we'll find a mule going along. Anyhow, we'll manage something."

"But you can't!" cried the child, gazing upwards at the almost overhanging ledge, over which the boy's quick eyes were rapidly travelling. "I don't believe you could get up alone. I'm sure you couldn't carrying me."

For answer he laughed, swung his knapsack over his shoulder, and began to climb with a precision and agility which astonished her. She saw him top the crag and draw himself up ; and a few minutes later he was descending without his bag by another and more circuitous path.

"It's as easy as lying!" he cried. "No, you needn't look shocked. That's only a quotation—some old Johnny said it before me! I'm only afraid of hurting your foot. But I'll try hard not to ; and anyway, it won't hurt as much as lying out here in a thunderstorm, to be drenched like a drowned rat."

The little one did not lack courage ; and she set her teeth as the boy lifted her and stood her upon her uninjured foot, kneeling down before her, that she might clasp him round the neck, and get a thorough good grip before he rose. With the belt of his Norfolk jacket he made a sort of sling for the sprained ankle, and then, without more ado, rose to his feet and commenced the ascent, asking no questions and making no pause, though he heard from time to time the little one's quick gasps, betraying that the transit was not made without suffering to her.

"There!" he cried, as they stood on the firm road at last. "Here we are, as right as rain! And you're a good plucked one, you are. I'm sorry I hurt you; but I couldn't help it. We'll be all right now, you'll see."

The little delicate-featured face was very white as he laid the child upon a bank of moss; but she smiled bravely, looking up into his face through the cloud of her dusky hair.

"You carried me so nicely. How clever you are, and how strong! I felt so heavy on your back."

"Heavy!—about as heavy as a gossamer web," laughed the boy, who was carefully peeling off a great shale of bark from a felled tree close by. "Now look here," he continued, "you just let me make a sort of cradle for your foot out of this, to hold it level, and keep it from hanging down; and then I'll carry you quite comfortably in my arms. It'll be better so than on my back."

Really he was a very clever boy, the child decided, as she watched his swift, decided movements. He made the cleverest contrivance for supporting her foot and ankle, and when it was strapped in place by his knapsack straps, he lifted her bodily in his arms, as a nurse lifts an infant, and would have left his own bag to take care of itself in the road, had she not insisted on carrying it for him herself.

"You'll never be able to carry me all the way home, Brown Boy," she said.

But he looked down at her with a smile in those curious red-brown eyes of his, as he answered;

"What do you bet?"

All the same, they had to halt for a rest at intervals ; and as they did so for the third time, the little girl pointed downwards towards some rising spirals of smoke, and said :

"That's the hotel down there. You will stop there, won't you, Brown Boy? and my father will—will—will thank you for being so kind to me."

She had hesitated whether or not to say "reward" you. She could not make out about this boy whether he were poor or rich ; whether he would be pleased to receive money, or offended. She glanced up into his face now, and he answered quickly and decidedly :

"I never stay at hotels. I will give you safe over to your friends and go on. My holiday is almost up. I've got no time for stopping anywhere."

Her eyes opened wide, and she looked at him a little wistfully. He was a nice boy, she decided, though odd. He had been very kind, and she liked him. She did not want him to go right away out of her life. She thought him rather interesting.

"Then shan't I see you ever any more?" she asked wistfully.

His eyes looked straight down into hers. He was silent for a short while, and then he said a very strange thing, though it was one of those things which are less strange when spoken to a child than to one of more advanced years.

"You won't see me again for a long while perhaps. But some day I shall come back—and marry you. When I come for you then, will you be ready?"



She looked up at him gravely and wonderingly ; she seemed to weigh his words, but not to be astonished by them.

"I don't think I can, Brown Boy," she answered. "You see, I am an earl's daughter. When I marry I shall have to make a good marriage. Nurse has told me that often."

"An earl's daughter," he repeated slowly. "I'm sorry for that. It may make it more difficult. But I'll do it, all the same. Will you tell me your name, please."

"I am called Lady Marcia Defresne. My father is Lord St. Barbe. We used to be partly French once ; but we are all English now."

"Came over with the Conqueror, no doubt," spoke the boy, a little grimly. "And so your name is Marcia, is it ? Then you belong doubly to me."

She looked at him wide-eyed and wondering, not understanding.

"I shall have to marry in my own world, Brown Boy," she said, a queenly little air mingling with her wistful regard for her friend and champion. "Somehow, I do not quite think that you belong there ; do you mind my saying so ?"

"Holy Moses, no !" cried the boy, with a gleam in his eyes, though whether he meant this as a reply to one or both parts of her sentence she did not know. His eyes were fixed upon her face with a curious intensity of scrutiny. Then he asked a question—a curious question to put to a child : "Do the

daughters of earls, then, never marry out of their own world—their own class?”

Marcia considered. Child though she was, she lived a life in which she saw and heard much that would not come within the range of many children's knowledge.

“They do, sometimes,” she answered; “but then, you understand, there has to be something to make up. He must have done something to make himself famous, or he must be very, very rich.”

“Ah!” said the boy, drawing in his breath with a curious, whistling sound, “I rather thought as much.”

The boy and girl looked one at the other in silence for a while. He so strong, so decided, so masterful—squarely built, like the sons of toil, yet with a firmness of fibre, both physical and mental, that raised him above the common herd; she as dainty as a Dresden china shepherdess, a creature of dreams and mystery—a wonder-child, in his eyes, like nothing he had ever seen in his world before—compelling him to thoughts and purposes such as had never entered into his calculations hitherto.

Then he took her up in his arms, and in perfect silence bore her downwards towards those traces of habitation, becoming more marked at every turn in the zigzag path.

A few minutes later, and an excited rush from the great hotel showed that the pair had been sighted. Soon they were swallowed up in an exclaiming and wondering crowd. The little girl was borne away towards the big building, he just possessing himself



of his knapsack, and then standing aside to let others do their will.

A fair-haired little boy had rushed upon the little girl, and now he was standing beside her as she lay on the terrace, asking torrents of questions, whilst others hung over the pair, and Marcia in vain attempted to tell her tale coherently.

"Boy—what boy?" spoke Lord St. Barbe at length, catching the sense of her words, and staring about him.

"The boy who carried me down—where has he gone?" cried Marcia, sitting up.

But nobody had seen the boy after the first encounter. He had vanished as it were into thin air; and only the sprig of edelweiss, carefully pinned into Marcia's hat, remained to convince her that the Brown Boy had not been part and parcel of a dream.

## CHAPTER II

### AFTER TEN YEARS—TWO SCENES

MARCUS DRUMMOND stood with his back to the fire. His parents sat on either side the glowing hearth in earnest conversation, not a word of which he lost, turning his head slightly from one to the other as the ball of speech was tossed to and fro.

His mother was excited, and betrayed her excitement by the nervous movements of her hands, and by the unwonted rapidity of her words. There was something majestic in the aspect of Lady Drummond—something stately in her height and purposeful in her manner. It was from her that her son had inherited the rather massive proportions of his frame and his regular features, though these were in his face more decisive and more blunt in outline than in hers. The width of brow and square jaw came from his father's side; but Marcus Drummond was a far handsomer man than Sir Robert would ever be. The latter did not lack force; but he lacked culture, refinement—that nameless heritage of breeding without which a man of his calibre is wont to be dubbed a diamond in the rough. Sir Robert had set himself a great task—and he had accomplished it. His grandfather

had been foreman in a small colliery. His father had risen to be proprietor. He himself was master of a large mining industry; a man of vast, if not colossal wealth; married to a lady of gentle birth and ancient family; lately created a baronet for services to his county—a man who was born to power and to success, and who had never swerved one hair's-breadth from the course mapped out for himself at the start of life. But through all this, Sir Robert would never be a gentleman—and he knew it. He did not drop his h's, or commit social solecisms. He talked well on a few subjects with which he was acquainted, and left the rest alone.

But his wealth and his power had placed him at last upon the summit of his ambitions. A seat in the legislature of the country was now his. Tomorrow he and his wife left Derbyshire for London, there to choose for themselves a house which for the future would be their principal home. Marcus would remain on here in the country seat—the fine old Tudor house which ten years before Sir Robert Drummond had purchased from the last of the old Falconer family. He had taken much pride in restoring, and his wife in furnishing, Falconer's Hall. It was almost regarded in the light of a show place in the locality, and lying as it did some ten miles by road from the pits which still went by the name of Drummond's Pits, was conveniently near for the master, who was no longer the acting manager of the flourishing industry.

Marcus was the only child of his parents—to the

lasting regret of Lady Drummond, who deeply desired a daughter. He had inherited much of his father's calibre, softened and refined by other influences, and by the associations of his childhood and youth. For he had received the public school and university training his mother insisted upon, and he had shown considerable talent and ability in study. But for all that, his interest centred in his home—less, however, in the grandeur of Falconer's Hall than in the smaller and earlier home of his childhood, scarcely a mile from the pits' mouth.

Wold Hall was the name of this old stone house, set back on the slope of a hill, and surrounded by solemn pines and heather which crept up almost to the walls and doors. Sir Robert had never transmogrified that ancient, grim stone house. To let that alone and spend his money upon a larger and finer property had always been his purpose, and his wife had had the sound sense and trained taste to agree with him there. She had lived a somewhat Spartan life in that Spartan home for many years without a murmur; and had then been transplanted to the more congenial surroundings of Falconer's Hall.

But Marcus had always loved best the first house; and since he retained active oversight of the pits, he had always kept the old place habitable, and lived more of his time there alone than with his parents at Falconer's Hall, though that was also his home. And now, as he heard them discuss their plans for the future, and how London would henceforth claim

them for the bulk of the year, he looked full at his father and said :

"Then shut up Falconer's Hall for the present. I shall never live here alone. I shall go to Wold, and make that my headquarters. This will do for your country house; but it won't have much of my company when you are gone."

Then his mother looked full at him, and said :

"Till you marry, Marcus. But you will marry soon, and then Falconer's Hall is to be yours—and we shall only be visitors there at your invitation. Your father and I have talked it over. We shall have our London house, and probably a small country place in Surrey or on the river, to run down to with our friends for Sunday and short holidays. But Falconer's Hall will be your home; and the sooner you marry and settle, the better for us all."

"Yes, my boy," said Sir Robert, "we are anxious for that, your mother and I. You are six-and-twenty, and it is time you settled in life. And if you visit us in London, we can introduce you to some of the smartest girls in the kingdom, I take it."

Marcus stood up very square and straight before them. Into his deep-set, wide-open, red-brown eyes a curious gleam had leapt. He knew perfectly by this time what his parents wished for him. They had both spoken of it before now, and he recognised the reasonableness of their desire. Hitherto, however, he had maintained an absolute reserve upon the subject, so that they had no clue whatever

to the state of his feelings. Now he suddenly spoke.

"I shall only ask to be introduced to one girl," he said. "I want to marry Lady Marcia Defresne, the only daughter of Earl St. Barbe. And I am not in any hurry about that. If she chooses somebody else, I shall make no trouble of it. But I don't think I shall marry anybody else myself."

They gazed at him in amazement. Lady Marcia Defresne! It was a name they had never heard before. How had Marcus met her, and where? And how long had he been cherishing this secret attachment?

"I have only spoken to her once," he said, in response to his mother's questions, "but I have seen her, in the distance, very occasionally. She was at Commemoration last June. You know I went to have a look round at the old place. Her brother, Viscount Ennisvale, is at Oxford. He comes of age almost immediately, I have heard. I saw them both there. Once I saw her riding in the Row; that was two years ago, when she was just out. She is twenty now—or will be soon. There are only those two children, and they are very near in age together."

"And you wish to marry an earl's daughter," chuckled Sir Robert, well pleased. "Bravo, boy, bravo!"

"I intend to marry Lady Marcia Defresne—if I can do so," replied Marcus, very quietly; "and I tell you this now because you may be able to help me. Only two things I beg of you at the outset: Do not



hurry matters—she is very young—give her time ; and never drop the smallest hint, when you do make her acquaintance, as to my existence, or what I have said. She does not know my name. I do not think she would remember my face. I was once able to render her a small service ; but most likely she has long ago forgotten it. When I meet her next we meet as strangers. Please to remember that.”

Sir Robert nodded his head slowly. He had come by this time to recognise in his son qualities kindred to his own. Marcus knew what he wanted, and meant to get it—in his own way. He might accept help from others in the preliminaries ; but he would play his hand independently, and most likely, if let alone, would be found to hold the winning cards.

“Right, my boy, right ! you shall manage your own matter in your own way. I will make it my business to find out all I can about this family, and your mother shall make acquaintance, if possible, with Lady St. Barbe and her daughter. The rest we will leave to you.”

Marcus nodded his head in token of acknowledgment, and strode from the room. Perhaps he had said more than he intended already. At least, he plainly intended to say no more. They looked after him, and then at one another. A smile passed from one face to the other.

“Had you any idea of this ? ”

“Not the least. I was afraid he would never look at a girl. None of those we have asked here have ever taken his fancy for a moment. In two days he

is always off to Wold Hall. I was afraid he was to remain a confirmed bachelor. I wonder where he met her, and what she is like?"

"We must find that out. The boy is in earnest. I am sure of that. Well, he shall have his chance. And if it should be that this Lord St. Barbe is one of your many impoverished and needy peers, I may be able to play a little private game of my own which shall facilitate that of Marcus."

"But do not let Marcus get an inkling of that sort," spoke Lady Drummond anxiously; and her husband regarded her with a humorous twinkle in his inscrutable eyes.

"I was not born yesterday, old lady," he said.

The young viscount came forth out of the library with a very white face. He had been shut up there with his father and the family lawyer for above an hour. Marcia, grown anxious and restless, with the premonition that something was wrong, was prowling up and down the gallery overlooking the hall. Now she came flying down the wide, shallow-stepped staircase with that sweeping grace of movement which was one of her notable characteristics.

"Ennisvale! Boy-boy—what is it? Is anything wrong?"

The old child-name, seldom heard between them now, brought a shadowy smile to the young face. Brother and sister, so near of an age, so closely linked in love together, stood beneath the radiance of the hanging lamp overhead, their hands clasped

together in that fashion which had never been quite abandoned, their heads almost on a level, his blue eyes gazing into her dark ones, and striving to smile through the cloud which had come to shadow their brightness.

He was fair; she was dark, with cloud-like hair that looked always as though some ruffling breeze had been playing in its meshes. They had the same delicate, high-bred features, short upper lip, curved nose and sensitive nostrils, and that fine-grained skin which in Marcia's case was almost more noticeable than her undoubted beauty of feature. She looked older than he, though in reality one year younger. He had come of age in the late summer, and great festivities had been held at the Barbican, as the family seat was called. Now these festivities were a month old. Autumn had succeeded to summer. Men of the law were back at their tread-mill; and the family solicitor had come down with a pile of documents, some of which required the signature of the heir.

Now, with a white and troubled face, he stood before his sister at the close of the interview.

"Come to my room, Ennisvale. Tell me what is the matter."

He followed her to her sanctum—a big low-ceiled room, bizarre in some of its effects; but a perfect medley and store-house of quaint treasures and daring harmonious colouring. The red palpitating glow of a wood fire filled the place with warmth and light. She pushed him into a low padded chair, and

stood over him, trembling slightly with the intensity of her feelings.

"It seems that everything is the matter," he answered. "We are only to be saved from a financial crash by the papers I have just been signing!"

"What papers?"

"Breaking the entail on the London property. That, you know, came to the St. Barbes by marriage a couple of generations ago, and does not belong to the old family estates, though it was thrown into the entail. Well, by breaking that, and selling the property, we shall just tide over the threatened crisis now. But this place is heavily mortgaged, Marcia; and I can see that our father has not a notion of retrenchment or of managing better. I've not much knowledge of business myself; but I can understand enough to see that it's going to cut up rough for me some day!"

"What do you mean, Ennisvale?"

Marcia was shaking all over. She was too young and inexperienced to understand the possibilities of the situation. It seemed to her as though some unknown peril menaced her beloved brother.

"I mean that if things go on this fashion—and so far as I make out they will—when I come into the property it will be to find it mortgaged up to the hilt; which means the income forestalled before ever it comes in, and no power to sell or clear things off; the timber cut down, the pictures gone—"

"The pictures! Oh, no, no, no!"

## The Secret of Wold Hall

"They will be the next, you will see," answered the young man grimly. "I mean that collection which came by the same heiress as brought the London property to us. I have signed papers to-day giving my father power to sell them. Oh, you may call me a fool and a Goth if you will, but one's father is one's father, and I hate the dishonour of unpaid debts! It had to be all or nothing. He professes now that the pictures will stay, but I think I know better. We shall be affluent for a short while if we get a good price for the London house and property, which neither you nor I care very much about, Marcia. But next time the shoe pinches, it will be the pictures that will go. When I come into my kingdom I shall be just a titled pauper, with nothing but a heritage of debts for my portion."

An unaccustomed note of bitterness had crept into Ennisvale's tones.

Marcia was quick to note it, and in pain she cried out: "Oh, no, no, no!"

"I think I shall emigrate," spoke the lad slowly. "I will stop on one more year at Oxford and take my degree. That may be useful to me anywhere. And we will see how things go. But if there is no change, then I think I will go off to America or Australia or South Africa, and see what I can do there. England is about played out for a pauper peer."

Marcia was silent a while, and then she spoke suddenly.

"Couldn't you marry an heiress, Ennisvale?"

That is what the Lords of St. Barbe have done before sometimes."

"Yes, when they had something to offer in return. But now—no, Marcia. That is a thing I cannot and will not do. You would not really wish it of me. You know you would not."

She did not answer. She stood quite still in the blaze of rosy, flickering light. A host of tumultuous thoughts and purposes was rising within her, and slowly out of the chaos and confusion a resolution was slowly rising, dominating her brain with a curious fixity and tenacity.

"Sisters have saved their brothers before now," was the outcome of her musings; "I will save Ennisvale."

## CHAPTER III

### MARCIA'S MOTHER

"LEAVE Marcia to me," spoke Lady St. Barbe quietly.

The Earl raised a haggard face, and looked at her intently.

"Leave Marcia to me," she repeated. "I understand her better than you do."

"I never professed to understand her," replied Lord St. Barbe. "But I should have thought it patent to the meanest capacity that Marcia is a girl who will never be coerced."

"I do not propose to try coercion."

He made a little irritable movement of his shoulders. It was a trick that seemed linked with his French blood. Both his children had inherited it.

"You can call it by what name you will. Of course in France, to this day, such marriages of convenience are made as a matter of course, and girls accept them without a murmur, and often with complete satisfaction, having confidence in the experience of their elders, parents, guardians, or friends. But what English girl will submit to have

her husband chosen for her, and to accept without seeing him? I was never so taken aback in my life as when Sir Robert calmly proposed it as a solution of some of these confounded difficulties. It's not even as though he had taken the trouble to bring the young man and present him. I'm afraid this omission goes far to indicate that he is absolutely unrepresentable."

Lady St. Barbe did not appear to be listening very closely. She had a way of ignoring her husband's irritable tirades, and letting him storm himself into silence. She had a calm temperament and a well-balanced mind. "Level-headed" was what Americans would have called her. Her face showed it—her clear, decisive features, her rather cold grey eyes, and her thin-lipped mouth. Hers was a handsome face; but not one to inspire affection. She was obeyed rather than beloved; but those who knew her best accorded her a wide measure of respect. She had done all that a woman could do to avert the ruin of her own life and the wreck of her children's fortunes. She had borne a brave front to the world in the midst of terrible perplexities and bitter humiliations. She was a loyal wife, and a careful, solicitous mother. Husband and children owed much to her, and some of them, at least, knew it.

"Sir Robert Drummond is a strange man," broke out Lord St. Barbe, after a moment's pause, "but he is extraordinarily generous over this matter. He has set his heart on it, that is very plain. Why, I



cannot guess ; for there are plenty of other handsome girls to be had, and more approachable ones than Marcia, too. But he wants Marcia, and nobody else ; and he has all the mortgages of the Barbican in his own hands, and will make Marcia a present of them on her wedding-day, quite irrespective of all settlements, which are liberal in the extreme. The man must be made of money. He has only been three years in Parliament, and he has made his mark there already. He is always listened to. He always has something to say, and when it is said, there is an end. He never talks for the sake of talking. That is a gift somewhat rare in our Legislature. Of course, he is a man of the people ; he never professes anything else. But if I were sure his son were of no coarser calibre, I should receive him gladly."

"His son should be of a finer grain. Lady Drummond was one of the old St. Clares."

"I know ; that is the one drop of sweetness in the cup of humiliation—that and the solid advantages to be reaped. But it is strange how he has been kept out of the way. To my knowledge, I have never seen him. His father says that London has few attractions for him. It seems he is practical owner now of the collieries in the north. His father has other enterprises on hand. The pits are left—profits and all—to the son. I suspect he is something of a boor, perhaps a brute. Yet on the other hand, he has had every advantage: Eton and Oxford, and all that. But he is nine-and-twenty

now, and the veneer may have worn off by this time."

"But the solid wealth remains. That is the point with which we have to deal. I believe I fully understand the details of the compact suggested. And if you will leave Marcia in my hands, I think I can undertake that she will not disappoint you. She will be ready to play the part desired of her."

"A modern Iphigenia!" muttered Lord St. Barbe, with something of a bitter sneer.

"Oh, no! merely the modern woman of fashion, who follows the example set her by her own world, without calling herself by any heroic names."

So saying, Lady St. Barbe rose and swept in her rather stately fashion from the room, and without any pause for further consideration, made her way through the suite of drawing-rooms to the tiny boudoir at the end, where Marcia was writing invitation cards for an evening reception the following week.

This present house which was occupied by the Earl and his family was not the fine house in Park Lane that had been their London domicile up till three years since. Now they had no town house of their own, but took one for the season, often having some ado to pay the cost. But pride and ambition forbade the thought of rustivating year in, year out, at the Barbican. Three months of fashionable London life they regarded as one of the necessary elements of life; as also these large and costly entertainments, which they could so ill afford.

Marcia looked up as her mother entered, and laid her pen aside. She rose to her feet and stretched her arms above her head, thus displaying the outlines of a singularly beautiful and slender figure, rather over the usual height, and moulded with extreme delicacy and finish. The same finish of contour characterised her face, and sculptors and artists raved together about her beauty ; but men of fashion declared her too cold, too proud, too scornful for them ; though keen observers might guess at the fires underlying the snow and ice, and surmise that the heart so sedulously hidden from view might be well worth the winning. Nevertheless, at the present time there was something distinctly proud and aloof in the girl's whole aspect and manner. Her mother, perhaps, understood better than any other person (having had herself long apprenticeship in the same bitter school) how the humiliation of their present position was eating into her very soul, and how the very strength and warmth of her affections intensified the bitterness of her spirit.

"Marcia," said Lady St. Barbe, "I have to speak with you upon a matter of great importance. It concerns the whole family as well as yourself ; and much will depend upon the answer you feel able to make."

Marcia's gaze was fixed upon her mother's face. Her large dark eyes, full of mystery and latent fire, began slowly to glow and burn. She stood perfectly still to listen, not interrupting by so much as a word.

"You know something of your father's position, Marcia. We need not discuss how these things have come about ; it is enough that his affairs are in desperate pass, and that he has come to an end alike of his resources and of the power of raising any more money upon the property. I have been facing this possibility, and striving to brace myself for the inevitable. I have seen it looming before us for years ; but I hoped that it would not touch you and your brother—that you would marry, both of you, and marry well. Of course, Ennisvale's position is against him. People know him for a penniless peer, and he is not worldly-wise enough to go heiress-hunting. Indeed, in spite of his four-and-twenty years, he still seems a boy. You are still his first thought, Marcia. He tells me every time I speak on the subject that he has never seen a girl yet who can hold a candle to you ; and so he has never seriously thought of marriage."

A slight smile curved Marcia's proud lips—a smile of ineffable tenderness ; but she did not speak.

"Marcia," spoke her mother, suddenly looking her full in the face, "have you ever been in love?"

"Never, mother," answered the girl instantly, her head just lifted in a gesture of unconscious pride.

"I thought not. Marcia, I am glad to know it ; for had it been otherwise—had you loved—I might not have dared to ask of you the thing I am about

to ask. Now I do it without compunction. Marcia, will you make a marriage of convenience, as you have constantly seen your French kinsfolk and acquaintance do—a marriage arranged for you by your parents, a marriage which will release them and your brother from these terrible pecuniary predicaments in which they are placed, and will raise you to the position which will enable you to secure Ennisvale's future, and free him from all those unjust and miserable embarrassments which your father has woven about him, and which else must practically ruin his career before it has well begun?"

Marcia stood like a marble statue; only her eyes asked for further details.

"It is a curious story, not without its elements of romance. You know Sir Robert Drummond; you have met him here, and at other places. You know he bought the London property when it was in the market. Probably you do not know that he also holds all the mortgages upon the Barbican, and a quantity of your father's notes of hand and I.O.U's. In fact, it appears that he is pretty well our only creditor. He has probably had his motive for this. Now it seems that he wishes for a marriage between you and his only son.

"Listen, Marcia, for it is here that the romance comes in. It seems that the young man, whom we have not seen to our knowledge, has seen you somewhere. It is his own desire to make you his wife. His father is only acting in accordance with

his wishes. How much the son knows of the details of these monetary transactions I am unable to say; but it is well that you should know what Sir Robert is prepared to do. Upon the completion of the marriage he will hand over to your father all the papers of his which he now holds, as a free gift, save only the mortgages upon the Barbican, and these will be his wedding gift to you. Do you see what that means, Marcia?"

"Tell me," spoke the girl, a little hoarsely.

"It means that you will have Ennisvale's future prosperity ensured. You must not destroy those papers. You must hold them in your own keeping. But so long as they exist, your father will be unable to raise another penny upon the family property. He will be bound to pay to you the interest on the mortgages. If you choose to remit those payments—good! It will give us back the ease and comfort in life to which we have long been a stranger. But make no promises, Marcia. Let your good-will, if it be exercised at all in that fashion, be only contingent upon the due management of that fully sufficient income. You can be firm, I know. Your father will stand in some awe of you if you occupy the position which this marriage will ensure to you. He has learned his lesson, I think. At least, he can do Ennisvale no further hurt. You hold the mortgages upon the entailed property. When Ennisvale, in the course of nature, enters upon his inheritance, you have only to put those parchments behind the fire—and your brother will stand

a free man, in the full enjoyment of that which his forefathers ruled and possessed before him."

Marcia drew a quick, deep breath; the light had deepened in her eyes; but otherwise she made no sign. Her mother continued speaking calmly and quietly:

"Marcia, had you loved elsewhere, I would not have made this suggestion to you. Where love is, a new and perilous element enters into all such bargains. But since you are heart-whole and fancy-free, I think you should seriously consider the proposition made to you. I have alluded to French marriages. You have seen something of them yourself, and their results. To our English notions these family arrangements seem strange; and yet I often look about me in our world of fashion, and ask myself whether our marriages turn out any the happier for the element of so-called freedom and romance which enters into their composition. The feeling which is taken for love at the outset is often a plant of feeble growth, which withers quickly away after courtship is past. To respect your husband, Marcia, to have confidence in his capacity for taking care of you, and of himself and his affairs, will go further and make for a more solid kind of happiness than any such sentimental attachment which soon loses its first bloom, and grows prosaic under the touch of cold reality. You know something of this, my daughter?"

"I think so, mother. I have never cherished any romantic illusions with reference to the married state."

She stopped short suddenly ; for though she spoke the truth as to the concrete aspects of life which she had seen and studied, she became suddenly conscious of that living world of romance and poetry which lay locked away in unexplored recesses of her being.

"Perhaps that is well, Marcia, although I am sorry in a sense that it is so ; for you have missed some of the sweetness of your girlhood. Still, it may be safer thus. Happiness may come to you where you least expect it. And now, my daughter, think well over these things which I have told you, and when you are able to reach a decision, let me know it, that we may give an answer to Sir Robert Drummond."

Marcia was silent a while ; then she asked questions.

"Where is this son ?"

"At present in the north, near to the colliery. But you would not have to live there, Marcia. He has a splendid old Tudor house some ten miles away, where you would live in every luxury, and queen it to your heart's content. The settlements which will be made upon you are handsome in the extreme."

"What is his name ?"

"Mr. Drummond's ? Why, I have never asked ! Very probably he may be named after his father."

"I rather—like—Sir Robert Drummond," said Marcia slowly. "He is a man, and not a puppet."

"And his wife belongs to our world. There is much in that. If the son take after her, as sons so often do—"

"I think I prefer the father myself," spoke



Marcia, once more in her cool and rather incisive fashion.

She stood very quiet for some minutes, gazing straight before her with unseeing eyes, and her mother would not interrupt the current of her thoughts by a movement or by a word.

When she spoke, it was in a low voice, but one of inflexible determination.

"My mind is made up, mother," she said. "I will marry Sir Robert Drummond's son."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INTRODUCTION

"YOU can call it what you like ; I call it charmingly romantic !" cried Leslie, leaning back and gazing at Marcia with grave lips, but laughing eyes. "Oh ! you need not look so proud and cold and stately, you beautiful Galatea—or is it Pygmalion ?—I can never remember which is which. One suggests pork and the other galantine of veal, and I don't see much to choose between them. But anyhow, you do look like an image of marble or ivory when you choose to put on that air. You frighten lovers off, I believe ; but this one has fallen in love with you all unbeknown, and the way he's gone to work is just cute and cunning. It's modern, to be sure ; but we are all modern in these *fin-de-siècle* days. And after all, it's more sensible to help your family out of a tight place than to get chained up to a rock for a dragon to eat, by way of winning a romantic reputation."

"Leslie, you are talking nonsense, and you know it," answered Marcia, striving to be grave—a task she often found difficult in Leslie's company. "It is simply a question of barter. I am as much sold

to this Mr. Drummond—whose name, by-the-by, I don't know as yet—as though I were put up to auction in the slave market, and knocked down to the highest bidder, the only difference being that I have consented to be the victim of the detestable traffic. I am a party to my own dishonour and disgrace!”

“That's what makes it so delightfully romantic,” answered the incorrigible Leslie. “It's awfully sweet of you, Marcia, to be a slave and to let yourself be sold. When I see pictures of that sort of thing, I often feel what a charming time a lovely slave might have had! Wouldn't I lead my old man a life if ever I'd had the luck to be bought like that! Oh, one could have any amount of fun out of the situation. And after all, fun is the wine of life!”

Leslie Moncrieff—a vision of fairy-like loveliness herself—was lying back in a cloud of diaphanous drapery in Marcia's room, watching her friend array herself for the “sacrificial altar,” as she chose to phrase the introduction shortly to take place at the family dinner-table between Lady Marcia Defresne and the man she had consented to marry. Leslie herself was the only stranger admitted to be witness to these “sacred rites”; she, indeed, being almost like one of the family, although her kinship was not really very close. She had just come of age, and into an ample fortune, and she had neither father nor mother, and had been living with Canadian relations for some years. But before that, in their

girlhood, she and Marcia had been at school together, and all Leslie's holidays were then spent at the Barbican or the London home of her companion. Now Lady St. Barbe, who had welcomed her warmly on her arrival, was wondering whether Ennisvale might not do worse than fall in love with his one-time playmate and comrade. But so far no developments had taken place. Leslie insisted on living in her own exquisite little flat, under the nominal care of an excellent duenna; but she was in and out every day, and all day long, and Lady St. Barbe was introducing her to society and her own world of fashion.

Also Marcia, who had never made a girl-friend all these years, even as she had never had a lover, though admired and courted up to a certain point for the five seasons she had been out, welcomed her childhood's friend, as it were, with open arms. The two were intimate to a degree which often surprised themselves, seeing how opposed seemed their temperaments, and their outlook upon life and its issues.

Now, at this sudden crisis of her life, Marcia was glad to have Leslie with her. She had insisted that the girl should be included in the select party to-night, and she was resolved that she should share with her this first introduction to the lover she had accepted before ever she had seen his face.

Tall, snow-white, stately, she stood, her ivory neck and arms bare, her long trailing dress flowing round her in statuesque folds, her soft, cloud-like dark

hair piled high on her head ; no ornaments save a few heavily-scented hot-house blossoms of waxen whiteness. A bride—or a victim—prepared for the altar. Which was it ?—questioned Leslie to herself, regarding her critically through half-closed eyes.

They stood up and went down together—types of girlish beauty—the one dark, stately, queen-like ; the other seeming to breathe forth an air of dainty defiance and arch, imperious individuality, a Titania-like creature, all fire and snow. A painter might well have longed to dash upon canvas the picture presented by the pair as they emerged from the shadows of the upper regions into the soft light of the lower floors.

April twilight lingers long when the month has nearly run its course. When Marcia opened the drawing-room door, expecting to find the room empty still, the yellow light of the sky, entering through the unblinded western windows, fell full upon a tall figure standing back to the light in an attitude which somehow expressed expectancy, whilst a murmur of talk from the inner drawing-room indicated the fact that the guests had already arrived.

Marcia experienced a curious throb at heart as she realised that most likely she was now in the presence of the man who was to be her future husband. Involuntarily she paused just beyond the threshold ; and it was Leslie, whose impatient feet carried her eagerly forward alone.

“ You are Mr. Drummond ! ” she exclaimed,

advancing with outstretched hand ; and for a moment it crossed Marcia's mind to wonder whether he would suppose that this fair and radiant creature was his prospective bride.

But the next instant she was undeceived. The tall stranger bowed, and touched the hand extended to him ; but his glance went past her, and he moved slowly forward till he stood before Marcia herself.

"You are Lady Marcia Defresne," he said quietly ; and almost before she was aware of it, she found her hand in his.

He knew her then, by sight. In that she had been told truth. Her grave dark glance was bent upon his face, as he stood between her and the fading daylight, just within the radiance of the one shaded lamp which had already been kindled in the corner. No, she did not think she had ever seen him before. The square face, and the wide brow with the strongly-marked eyebrows, and grave, resolute eyes, were all unfamiliar to her. She might, of course, have been in his company many times in a crowd, and overlooked him ; but she thought had they ever been introduced, she would have some recollection of his face.

But before there was time for the interchange of more than the first inevitable commonplaces, Ennisvale came hastily in, and greeted the stranger with easy grace and geniality. A rather delightful person, Viscount Ennisvale—"a dear boy"—as mothers with daughters called him, whilst rather fearing his fascinations, since it was known that his

fortunes were in desperate state. But he did not attempt to flirt, or to seriously woo the daughters. He was charming to all, but showed no special attentions to any. Men liked him, treating him always rather as a fascinating boy than as a growing man. Perhaps he had not an enemy in the world, his sunny temperament and gay buoyancy of spirit making him universally popular. The vein of happy insouciance, which was due, perhaps, to his admixture of French blood, had carried him gaily through all life's embarrassments and troubles. He had long since made up his mind not to let the family bug-bear of chronic poverty weigh him down. He was ready to emigrate and make his way in a new country at any moment; and but for Marcia's clinging affection, would probably have cut the cables before this.

Dinner was almost immediately announced. Lord St. Barbe appeared from the inner room with Lady Drummond on his arm; he signed to his guest to give his arm to Marcia. Ennisvale escorted Leslie, exchanging meaning glances with her the while, and Lady St. Barbe with Sir Robert brought up the rear.

They were so small a party that conversation for the most part was general. Marcia felt like a person in a dream, as she answered from time to time, in mechanical fashion, the questions or remarks addressed to her. Lord St. Barbe, who had some renown as a conversationalist, was unwontedly brilliant to-night, and Ennisvale seconded him with

energy and success. Sir Robert could speak well and tellingly, and Lady Drummond had by this time regained the position in her own world which her marriage had for a time eclipsed. Marcia's voice was seldom heard; and her partner was almost equally silent. Perhaps those two were not expected to talk much under the circumstances. When the ladies withdrew, Leslie's arm was slipped impulsively within Marcia's; and whilst the two mothers sat together upon a sofa beside the fire, with heads bent near to each other, the girls passed through into the adjoining room, and Leslie pushed Marcia into a deep chair and stood over her, as though resolved that she should not escape her either physically or morally.

"Now, Marcia, tell me the unvarnished truth. What do you think about him now you have seen him?"

"I don't feel that I have seen him yet—you don't see much of your partner at a dinner-table; and at present my mind is a blank regarding him. I think nothing at all."

"Oh, you slow creature! I have thought ten thousand things already. He's not a monstrosity, anyhow. I was rather disappointed in that at first. I think it would be rather distinguished to marry a dwarf, or a two-headed man, or a freak. However, that may be a matter of opinion. But I'll tell you what this man is—he's a survival. He belongs to another age than ours. Don't scientific old fogies say that there's been an ice



age, and a stone age, and all that sort of thing? Well, there may have been ice-men and stone-men too, I suppose; but he's not one of them. He's a bronze man. Was there a bronze age ever? You don't know? Nor I either. I never know anything like that. But I do know that Mr. Drummond is a bronze man, whether there ever were such creatures or not. He's got bronze hair and bronze eyes and eyebrows; and when he grows his beard, that'll come bronze too, you'll see. But I like men with clean-shaved faces; I like to see their mouths; and they generally like to hide them. The bronze man has a good mouth, Marcia—but a bronze expression, if there is such a thing. Everybody knows what an iron will is, so I suppose one can have a bronze one too."

"You talk a great deal of nonsense, Leslie dear."

"He knew you, Marcia. Do you know him? Where can he have seen you before?"

"I don't know; anywhere, for the matter of that. One lives in a crowd. But I begin to have a feeling of having seen him before. I can't remember where or how; but when he speaks a memory comes back to me. There is something in his masterful way that seems familiar; but yet I don't believe I have ever spoken to him in my life."

Leslie was all on fire with curiosity; but with the best endeavours, Marcia could tell her nothing more. And before they had finished diving into

the past and hunting for the lost clue, the man himself stood before them, and Marcia lifted her eyes to his face, and felt for the first time that she had seen it before.

"May I speak with you a short time, Lady Marcia?" said the man; and she rose and led the way out upon the covered balcony, where the warmth of the soft spring evening still lingered.

"Do you remember me?" he asked, as they stood together there; and she shook her head, yet betrayed by her face a vague uncertainty.

"Did your sprained foot give you much trouble? I always wanted to know that, but never could find out."

A sudden flood of recollection swept over her.

"The Brown Boy!" she exclaimed.

Then they were silent, standing side by side tense and motionless, whilst the tide of memory surged over Marcia, and she remembered how the Brown Boy had told her that he would come back and marry her one day. A thrill ran through her as she gauged something of the tenacity of purpose which had dominated the life of this man. For thirteen years she had scarcely given him a thought; but he had been planning and working; and at the last she had been enmeshed, as it were, like a fly in a spider's web. A sense of something almost akin to fear rose suddenly within her. Was there not something just a little terrible in this fixity of purpose—and its consummation?



"You make me afraid of you!" she suddenly said. "Have you been thinking of this ever since?"

"I do not believe that ever a day has passed that I have not thought of you," he answered gravely.

Marcia shivered slightly. This was not love; boys of sixteen do not fall in love; but the masculine desire of possession may come at any age.

"I told you then that you belonged to me—or something like it. I felt it through every fibre of my being then. I feel it every time I see you. Even our names seem to link us together."

"I do not know your name," she said, in a low voice.

"My name is Marcus Drummond. Until you told me yours that day, I did not even know that Marcia was a girl's name. But I thought then that it would be a fitting name for—my wife."

He spoke the word after a brief pause, and in a tone which smote strangely on her ears, for she did not know what emotion it expressed. Again she slightly shivered, and drew a little away. He seemed quick to note her movements, and spoke at once.

"But though I resolved upon this, and have worked for it, I will marry no woman against her will. If you do not wish me for your husband, Lady Marcia, you have only to say so—and I go. It was told me that you had accepted my

suit without hesitation, and not under any species of compulsion ; otherwise I should not be here to-night. If my personal presence be distasteful to you, I will leave instantly, and you shall see my face no more."

And as he spoke, she knew him capable of keeping his word, and saw slipping out of her reach all those things she most coveted for those nearest and dearest to her. That must not and should not be. Though her heart was untouched, her mind was moved to a certain admiration (not entirely unmixed with fear) for this man who was at once so resolved, so inflexible of purpose, yet so ready to renounce all at a word from herself. Well, let him see that her will could hold as firm as his own. She had resolved upon the step—the sacrifice—she was about to make. There should be no flinching—no drawing back now.

She lifted her head and looked full into his face. It was a curious look that passed between the pair ; it rather resembled the gaze of antagonists prior to a duel than the glance of love betwixt an affianced pair.

"Do not go," she said ; "not by my will, at least. If you wish to marry me, I accept you without compulsion—of my own free will. That is a thing within my power to grant, and you have asked no more. Love is not in the bargain."

"Love can wait till you are my wife, Lady Marcia," he answered. "If I cannot teach you to love me then, the fault will be mine, not yours. I

do not call the sentiment love which half the world is content to marry upon."

She was silent. Certainly there was power and originality about this man. Was he indeed a survival—and of what?

"I mean to woo you in my own way," he went on. "I have watched your career. I have given you line. You have proved yourself—what I knew you would do—different from other women. Love has not touched your heart. Therefore I would not come as lover. What have I to offer you in myself? You are singularly beautiful. I am plain and rough. You have noble birth. I am plebeian. You have culture, imagination, innumerable gifts. I am a man of facts and figures. But I have one thing to lay at your feet—gold without measure. I can endow you like a princess. I can free your life and the lives of those you care for from those embarrassments which beset them. I made no approach to you. It is not for what I am that I ask you to take me; but for what I have. Others could tell you that better than I myself. They have done their part. The compact has been struck, and you are prepared to abide by it. That is good. You will know before you marry me, Lady Marcia, what I have. What I am I hope to teach you afterwards."

With that he put out his hand, took hers—which was icy cold and slightly trembling. He lifted it to his lips, and just touched it. Then without another look or word he left her—passed through the room

without word or sign. She saw him next minute in the street striding rapidly away.

She gazed at him with wonder and amazement in her eyes, and then down at the hand he had kissed. What did he mean by his last words? Did they contain a challenge or a menace?

## CHAPTER V

### MARRIED IN MAY

CERTAINLY Leslie saved the situation ; and Lady St. Barbe was grateful. From first to last Leslie insisted that this marriage, which had been a matter of arrangement between the two fathers, and which might have been called nothing but a bargain on both sides, was the most romantic episode which had ever come beneath her notice ; and after learning that Marcus Drummond had been the boy who thirteen years before had rescued Marcia from the perilous predicament into which her childish rashness had led her, she had some foundation whereon to uprear her airy structure.

" He fell in love at sixteen—and now he is to reap his reward," she would say. " I call it just fascinating ! I should be awfully proud of any lover who had waited for me all that time, and had never given up the idea of making good his words. He told Marcia when she was a mite of a child that he would come again and marry her—and that is just what he has done now ! "

Society listened greedily to the tale ; and Marcus Drummond found himself famous in the little world

into which for the moment he had perforce to step. It irked him—it humiliated him—to find that episode, which for thirteen years had been enshrined as sacred in his heart, bandied about as a tit-bit of gossip in London drawing-rooms. In three days it was all over the place. On the fifth day after their first meeting he presented himself before Marcia, and asked :

“ Will you marry me in three weeks from this ? ”

She looked into his face with startled eyes. He had come upon her unexpectedly, though, to be sure, he had the right of entrance into her presence now. She saw him clearly by daylight for the first time, and instantly Leslie's words recurred to her. “ A man of bronze ! ” Yes, he looked it as he stood before her. Hair and eyes, the tan of his face, the hue of the suit of tweed he wore, all partook of that bronze-like tint ; and the expression upon the resolute features suggested the inflexibility of some hard metal, although there was a look deep down in the eyes that betokened capabilities of a different calibre.

Marcia was aware of a curious thrill passing through her. It was an experience uncommon with her in the presence of a concrete man. Generally she was alone with her own dreams, her own musings, her own ideals, when this tremor of the senses came upon her, with its suggestion of unbelievable possibilities. For a full minute she remained silent, living through a strange and strenuous experience. Then she spoke quite quietly :



"If you wish it I will marry you this day three weeks."

"On the 21st of May?"

"Yes."

As if by compelling habit, he drew out a note-book and made an entry of the date. Marcia watched him, lying back in her chair, and feeling like a woman in a dream. Here was a man with whom she had not conversed half an hour in her life (barring that episode in her far-away childhood), calmly making a note of that ceremony which should bind their lives inalienably together—for better, for worse. From that day forward she would pass into his possession. His home would be hers; her life would be his, to order and to dominate. She felt that he would be a factor to be reckoned with in the future. He would not be a thing of clay or of putty, to be bent this way and that at her will. She had elected, for reasons which seemed to her compelling, to accept this man of bronze for her husband—and she must abide by her own act.

He closed his book and pocketed it, and looked down at her again.

"One question more, Lady Marcia. Do you desire the conventional wedding trip after our marriage? And have you any wishes on the subject with respect to locality?"

Things seemed rushing on at express speed now. It was with some difficulty that Marcia retained the outward air of calm indifference which she strove after. A wedding trip!—a journey with this

unknown stranger! The weary round of trains, steamers, hotels!—her soul sickened at the thought. Her answer was a quick and searching question to him.

“Have you any alternative to suggest?”

“Yes; the alternative of a return to simpler methods. Our forefathers knew nothing of honeymoon journeys. A man took his wife straight home to the place he had prepared for her; and they began their married life rationally there from the first. Falconer’s Hall is ready. ‘For more than a year I have been preparing it for you. I do not want to be long away from the pits. There is trouble brewing in the coal country, as perhaps you may know. It is better for the master not to be absent too long.’”

A faint quickening of interest stirred Marcia’s pulses. Here was a man with a man’s work before him—no drone in the world’s hive—a man whose vast wealth did not detach him from active personal oversight and toil.

“Will you not sit down whilst we speak of these things?”

He seated himself opposite to her, upright and uncompromising, as she said to herself, regarding him steadfastly. He was an enigma to her as yet. He belonged to a world to which she was a complete stranger; yet this world would soon in a measure belong to her. She would ask him then and there something respecting it.

“Is Falconer’s Hall near to the pits, then?”

"No; not near enough for there to be any close association. Two ridges of hills lie between. You cannot see the smoke or guess at the grimy proximity of the collieries from there. My father bought the property some years ago—to get my mother right away from all association with the pits. Now it belongs to me. It is a fine house. I think you will like it. And there you will reign supreme. I will not trouble you greatly, Lady Marcia. I am well aware that you will not desire too much of my society at the first. I will not inflict myself too frequently upon you. You shall fill the house with your own friends, if it please you, and live your own life there in exactly the manner you prefer. I am a busy man myself. I am obliged to live a considerable portion of my time at my own small house near the pits. I am more at home there than at Falconer's Hall, where I have always felt more of a guest than a master. I shall be content to remain on the same footing still—my wife's guest, whenever she desires my company."

He looked full at her, and suddenly a smile shone in his eyes. It brought back for the moment the memory of the Brown Boy, who had come to her rescue in a moment of peril long years ago.

"But—I mean—I do not quite understand you. Falconer's Hall is your own house—your own home!"

"It is my house at this moment. After our marriage it will cease to be mine. It will be yours, Lady Marcia. Your house—your home. I hope

also my home, in time. That, however, will depend entirely upon your wishes."

"But you will live there. It is to be—" she paused, a wave of hot colour rose in her face and ebbed away—"our home."

The glow in his eyes kindled to a vivid brightness; but his voice was cool and even as before.

"That is my hope, Lady Marcia. It will certainly be our ostensible home, where we shall receive your world, and entertain on whatever scale you desire. But I wish you to understand from the outset that my claims upon you will be few. I entertain no illusions as to our marriage. I want you; you want, not me, but those things which I have in my power to give you. You give me far more than I give you, and I appreciate the sacrifice you make. If I am called by business frequently to Wold Hall (as is inevitable), your guests will not miss me, nor regard my absence as an eccentricity. It is the way of the world, that is all. In our little Rome we shall only be doing what the big Rome of society does, and has done for long enough."

Silence fell between them, and Marcia heard the ticking of the little carriage clock on the bracket behind, and the beating of her own heart, which sounded so loud in her ears that she felt as though he must surely hear it too. But he had now risen to his feet. He had said his say, and was going. Marcia slowly rose, and held out her hand to meet his proffered clasp. She half wondered if he would try to kiss her in farewell; but he did not. It was

she who spoke the final words that sealed the compact.

"Then we will strike out a new line for ourselves, Marcus, and dispense with any wedding trip. I should like to go straight to Falconer's Hall, and begin—" she hesitated a moment for the choice of the pronoun, and then added quietly — "our life there."

"So be it," he answered briefly, and was gone.


But when she was alone, Marcia found in the chair which he had occupied a case containing a necklace of the most exquisite pearls, and a diamond pendant, whose flashing fires seemed to glow and burn into her very heart.

"He is simply an ideal lover!" cried Leslie, when she saw and heard. "Didn't I tell you he was a survival? He does the most delightfully unconventional things! He wants to be married in May, of all unlucky months. He wants to escape the insufferable tedium of a honeymoon, and has the courage to suggest flying in the face of convention; and he gives his wife the reins of government, and makes himself her guest and humble devotee. Marcia, if you don't know your mercies in such a husband, you ought to be whipped! I call him a perfect museum and treasure-house of romantic ideas! I tell you what, Marcia, if you are tired of your bargain, you may hand him over to me! I believe I should appreciate him better. We might play Leah and Rachel on the wedding day, don't you think. If the veil were to be of lace, and I were

to get a dark 'transformation' for the occasion—why, I don't believe he would be a bit the wiser till it was too late !”

The world was much moved and interested in the marriage of Lady Marcia Defresne, who had won for herself the reputation of being invulnerable to the shafts of the blind god, as well as impervious to the promptings of ambition. She had certainly refused wealthy titled suitors in the past; but, to be sure, these were men who had enough on their own hands without accepting any burdens in respect of their wife's relations. It was shrewdly suspected in many quarters that Lord St. Barbe, in giving his daughter to the son of this plebeian millionaire, was gaining some substantial advantage for himself. Yet none the less, there was something about the marriage which redeemed it from the commonplace or the sordid. The strong personality of the Drummonds, both father and son, attracted attention and excited curiosity, and the whisper of the long-standing attachment of the bridegroom for the bride threw over the whole transaction a glamour of romance, and brought crowds of spectators to the fashionable church where the ceremony was performed.

No conventional detail of pomp or circumstance was lacking to the brilliant pageant. Hasty though the preparations had been, there was no trace of haste in the result. The bride, with her train of attendant white-robed supporters, of whom Leslie Moncrieff was the first and chiefest, made a group which for grace and beauty could not easily be



matched. Society papers revelled in descriptive paragraphs as to the dresses of the whole company, the sumptuousness of the banquet, and the magnificence of the presents.

Marcia moved through the gay scene as one in a dream, comporting herself with an unruffled composure that never failed her for a moment. Her responses in church were spoken clearly; her deportment during the trying ordeal of the breakfast and the speeches left nothing to be desired. To be sure, she was saved the humiliation many brides undergo in the helpless nervousness and blundering of the bridegroom. Marcus Drummond carried himself as a man of bronze might be expected to do. Even in the matter of returning thanks, his words were well-chosen and tersely emphatic, though some said a little enigmatic too.

"That is the kind of man to marry!" cried Leslie, when she and Marcia were alone together at last, for the necessary change of the bride's toilet prior to the start for the station. "I have been simply lost in admiration of him all the time. I have never been to a wedding before where the bridegroom did not appear wholly superfluous, and managed to make himself so many kinds of a fool before the day was out, that I have invariably resolved to continue in a state of single blessedness sooner than contemplate the horrors of calling such a creature my lord and master. I don't believe you half know yet how blessed you are in your choice, Marcia. But you'll learn it one of these days, my dear—see if you don't!"

Marcia's heavy, trailing bridal dress was off by this. Suddenly she flung her arms about Leslie, clinging to her convulsively, and shaking in her agitation.

"Oh, Leslie, Leslie, what have I done? I am frightened! I am frightened!"

Leslie braced herself for the almost inevitable reaction after all that calmness and stately indifference. She put Marcia into a chair, and stood over her, looking her full in the face.

"You need not be afraid, Marcia. I wish I could be half as happy about the average bride of society as I am about you. Oh, I know everything. I know you do not love him. You do not know him yet, child; and he takes some knowing—that man! Oh, yes, you vowed it all—love, honour, obey—we know the words by heart. It's a large order; but you will carry it out, Marcia. You will come to love him in time. I am quite sure of that. But he may not make it as easy for you at the first as some lovers would. His heart is too much in it, for one thing. And he has not learnt to play the lover—there have been no dress rehearsals. Do you understand what that means, Marcia?—and what you have to be thankful for in marrying the man who has only thought of you from the time he was a boy?"

"If I could think it that," spoke Marcia slowly; "but how do I know that he has not had a dozen fancies—loves—passions—in between, and has come back to his first thought rather from pride and



ambition than from—love? How can a man love a woman he does not know?"

"Men are curious creatures," was Leslie's only reply, "and your creature comes behind none in that qualification, Marcia. You will find that out in time, my dear."

"Leslie, come with me—if not to-day, almost at once! I want you. I cannot do without you! Say you will come—and soon."

"No, Marcia, I shall do nothing of the kind. I will come; but not too soon. I want my London season. I have to chaperon your mother, for one thing, and hunt up a husband for myself, for another. I want my fling, and I mean to have it. Hitherto I have been living all for you, my dear. Now I mean to shine unclipsed. But even without that motive, I would not come at once. You will be better alone at the first. It's conventional to say so—but for once it's true. You go down with your husband to Falconer's Hall, and when the season is over, then I'll see about paying you a visit—if you want any visitors by that time!"

## CHAPTER VI

### AN AWAKENING

MARCIA awoke with a start. The unfamiliar room was flooded with the brightness of the May morning, which found free entrance through the open window facing the south. Other windows there were still shrouded in silken curtains to exclude light ; but for all that, the great room was bright with the peculiar radiance of early summer sunshine, and Marcia gazed about her as one who dreams.

All her life she had been used to luxury of a kind ; but never before had she found herself in such sumptuous surroundings. The room was extremely large for a sleeping chamber — lofty and airy. The scheme of colour had been chosen and arranged with rare taste, she thought ; white, old gold, and a sort of delicate sea-green shot with opal tints. There was a great full-length mirror in a Venetian frame let into the wall in one place. Every accessory of the toilet-table was of silver or ivory. In a curtained recess she saw the gleam of the marble bath. She suddenly sat up, pushing the tumbled hair out of her eyes, and realising that this was not part of a waking

dream, as she had been imagining, but was reality and fact.

She remembered clearly the events of the previous day up till the time when they were steaming rapidly northward in the saloon carriage specially reserved for them. After that everything was blurred and indistinct. She had no recollection of anything beyond confused impressions, all shot with a blinding, physical pain that dulled and blunted every other sensation. In point of fact, Nature had taken vengeance upon Marcia for the strain she had been enduring the past few weeks of her life, and before she had been an hour in the train she had been perfectly prostrated by one of those intense headaches that simulate unconsciousness, and of her arrival at her new home she retained no kind of recollection.

Only once or twice in her life before had Marcia been thus prostrated. She felt the effects of the attack still, though the pain was all gone. She looked very white, and there were shadows under her eyes; but though she knew she should be a little shaky for a few hours after rising, she wanted to be up and about. It came over her that this had been a disappointing home-coming for—for—Marcus. Yes; she must learn to use that name now. He had been very good to her. She had a dim recollection even yet of his gentleness and protecting strength. She would get up, and seek and find him. Her hand was already on the bell, when the maid who had accompanied her from

London entered noiselessly, with a tray in her hands, and looked pleased to see her mistress awake.

Marcia also found herself hungry—at least, hungry enough to enjoy the delicate, bird-like repast prepared for her. Sitting up in bed, a delicate silk and lace jacket covering her night-garb, her hair loosely coiled and twisted about her head, and the curtains drawn back to let in the fresh air and sunshine, she began to feel the blood coursing more joyously through her veins than she had expected it to do. When her maid left the room she heard a voice outside—a masculine, masterful voice—that sent quick thrills through her pulses.

“Better, you say; getting some breakfast? That is right. I will go in and speak to her. I must see her before I leave.”

The maid seemed to murmur something, but the clear, incisive voice broke in again:

“Nonsense! I cannot wait. Be good enough to let me pass.”

Then the door, which had not been quite closed, opened, and Marcus entered, dressed for the saddle, with a hunting crop in his hand; tall, stalwart, virile, vigorous, his brown face very slightly flushed, his eyes extremely bright, his whole aspect denoting a marital force and authority of which Marcia was instantly and keenly conscious, and which set her heart fluttering with a number of emotions too complex to be analysed.

He strode forward towards the bed, and bending, kissed her on the brow, laying a strong hand lightly on her shoulder the while.

"Better, Marcia?" She thought it was the first time he had addressed her without the prefix. "That is well. But you look horribly seedy still. You must keep very quiet all day. I wish I could have stayed to look after you; but I found an important summons waiting for me from the manager of the pits, who is my right-hand man when I am away. I must ride over at once and have a talk with him. I hope very much to get back in the evening, but I may possibly be detained till to-morrow. Will you much mind being left alone? You don't look fit for anything but keeping quiet; and that woman of yours seems a managing sort of person, who understands what to do for you."

"I shall be quite right, thank you," answered Marcia, suddenly conscious of a feeling of inexplicable disappointment at her husband's enforced absence. "I have never minded being alone. I am rather fond of solitude. I will keep quiet to-day, and look about me. You must never let me stand in the way of your duty."

She felt that her words sounded cold. But she did not know what else to say. She who had never been shy, even as a child, felt suddenly extraordinarily shy now in the presence of this man. She wanted to touch the hand which lay still upon her shoulder. She wanted to look up at him and smile, and ask

him to come back quickly. But she could do neither. She kept her head a little bent, so that her face was hidden from him. Her words sounded formal and indifferent.

"All right, then. Mind you look better before I get back. No doubt you have letters to write and little things to see to. If you want a drive you have only to give your orders. There are horses and carriages at your disposal. Remember that this is your house, and you are mistress here. Good-bye, and take care of yourself. I shall get back as soon as I can."

"Do," she answered, trying to speak more warmly ; but to her quick ears the monosyllable seemed to come as with an effort.

He touched her brow again with his lips, and was gone. Marcia was left alone in the magnificence of her new abode.

It was indeed a most fair and stately house, set in exquisite surroundings. Marcia decided not to explore it till Marcus was with her to show it. She felt languid and shaken, and she quickly passed out into the fair gardens, which showed evidences of the loving care of generations of owners long since dead and forgotten. The flowering shrubs were in the zenith of their glory ; the air was heavy with the scent of lilac, azalea, hawthorn, and syringa.

A favoured spot was Falconer's Hall, facing the south, sheltered from north and east, and lying in an alluvial valley, where the soil was rich and fertile,

and where rare plants would flourish that were seldom seen so far away from the sunny South. The air had that crystalline clearness and buoyancy which belongs to mountainous districts. For though her own home lay so warm and sheltered, Marcia could see by the wild and rugged contours of the country beyond that she had come into no dreamy region of luxurious lotus-eating. Strenuous life lay behind those lofty ridges—the life in which Marcus was so intimately bound up. She felt a sense of growing curiosity to know more of his life—his work.

“If I cannot love him,” she said to herself, “I can respect him. I can interest myself in his work. I can be a good wife to him. With all Leslie’s nonsense, there is something in what she says. He has been wonderfully faithful to that boyish dream of his. It has been very curious. I am not sure that it does not frighten me a little sometimes; but if he has been tenacious of that idea all these years, he deserves something in return. He has given me with his own hands the papers which relieve my father of his sore embarrassments (for I shall never take a penny of interest from him), and which save Ennisvale’s inheritance for him. If he has realised his boyhood’s dream, he has enabled me to keep that vow I vowed three years ago—and to keep it in a fashion more full and complete than I ever dreamed of doing. Oh, I am grateful—and I will tell him so. I will give him the return he asks. I will be a good wife to him. Love is not ours to command; he has not asked it; perhaps he does not

desire it. They say love is out of fashion now between husband and wife—”

There she stopped short in her musing, rose hastily and broke off a great cluster of azalea mollis, which she fastened into her waistband. She remembered how Marcus had strode up to her side that morning, had kissed her brow, and laid his big, strong hand upon her shoulder. She felt the pressure again now. She could not love him, of course. He was still almost a stranger to her. She had only known him for a month, and had seen him but seldom in that time. But certainly there was something about him which differentiated him from the crowd of men with whom her lot had been cast. He stood out from them with a vivid individuality. She thought about him; his voice recurred to her when he was absent; she had dreamed about him of late with curious persistency. He had not asked her love, and most likely did not specially desire it; but respect and wifely submission she would give him freely. They could at least be true friends, if they were never truly lovers.

Marcus did not return that night. He sent a wire instead, intimating that he was detained till the morrow. Marcia, a little oppressed by the stately magnificence of her solitary house, went early to bed; and resolved the next morning to spend the hours before her husband's return out of doors, exploring some of the surrounding country.

She visited the stables, and picked out a sure-footed pony which she was told would carry her



safely anywhere amongst the crags and moorlands beyond the limits of her abode. Moreover, this pony had been trained to wait patiently for his rider at any given place; and could be trusted to browse quietly on the scant herbage, and not attempt to return homewards until his rider returned.

So Marcia dressed for the saddle, and rode out alone, soon quitting the high-road after passing the lodge gates, and taking a bridle-path which a sign-post told her led to the village of Three Brooks; and she remembered that this place was part of the address Marcus had given her during their brief engagement, when he had taken himself off for a flying visit to Wold Hall. She had not written to him; she had not felt that there was anything to say, and nothing had arisen which it was needful to communicate to him. Now she found herself wondering what sort of a place it was, and how far from Marcus she would be when she reached it. She did not know the localities yet. She had failed to find a map anywhere in the house. But she felt, at least, as though she were drawing nearer to him as she rode; and there was a curious thrill at her heart in the thought.

The country grew wild and grand as she proceeded—rolling moors stretched away into blue distance, broken up with great grey boulders and masses of craggy rock, which were cleft in places into deep, savage ravines, where the voices of tumbling waters could be heard shouting in their wild onrush. Before

she had reached the little grey village set in a fold of crag and down she felt she had come to a quite new world ; and the cobble-stoned street, and the curious loneliness of the quaint little town, accentuated this feeling not a little. Moreover, she found she could barely understand the dialect of the people when she spoke with them. With some difficulty she made out that Wold Hall and the colliery village close to it lay beyond a rocky ridge of hills lying to the north. She was not tired, and she had sandwiches with her. She gave the pony a meal and water at the little inn, and then rode slowly forward and upward, resolved at least to reach the top of the ridge, and look what lay beyond on the other side.

But the sun was growing very hot, and the rough path became steeper and steeper. When Marcia at length reached a little green plateau about half-way up, she dismounted, and let the pony rest and feed. She took her own lunch leisurely, resolved to turn back in a short time. But when her limbs were rested, she felt herself drawn onwards by that impulse many feel when on a height, to gain the summit at all costs ; and leaving the pony to feed at will, she walked upward and onwards alone in the clear, brilliant sunshine.

Suddenly she came upon a sturdy little boy at play over some fortifications he had made in an old disused stone quarry, of which she had passed several on her way. The child was a handsome little chap, his clothes protected by a clean smock,

with fine needlework about it, though the material was homely enough. He did not look quite like a cottage child, nor yet like a gentleman's son; but in that solitary place she was not disposed to pass him by without a word, and indeed he was staring at her so intently and curiously that she had almost need to speak.

"Is this the way to Wold Hall, little boy?" she asked.

"No—at least, yes—you can get there, but it's a good way off, and very rough walking—for a lady. Besides, nobody lives at Wold Hall—now."

The boy seemed a child of about eight years, intelligent and independent. He pointed up the path, and added:

"You get to my house along this path; Hill Top Farm it's called."

"But I thought I could get to Wold Hall too, this way—to look at it, I mean?"

"Oh, yes—you can see it. But it's shut up now. Mr. Drummond is married. He's gone to live at Falconer's Hall."

Marcia smiled, as she sat down upon a mass of fallen stone.

"Yes, I know that, little boy. I am the lady Mr. Drummond married."

He stared at her now with a peculiar intensity—an intensity that was almost uncanny in so young a child. He seemed to be taking stock of her from head to foot, inside and out. She asked:

"What is it, little boy?"

"Did you like to marry him?" asked the child solemnly.

Marcia had some ado to restrain a visible start. What could the child mean? She could not ask him; but he went on speaking of his own accord. He was full of some thought of his own.

"I was just wondering how it felt to marry a man who had killed his friend," he said. "Did he tell you about it?"

Marcia spoke not a word. Her heart seemed to beat heavily within her, as though some strange nightmare were upon her.

"I think you do not know what you are saying, little boy," she said at last, trying to speak lightly.

"He killed my daddy," said the child at length; "at least, my grandfather says so, and tells me to hate him. Mammy Ruth says I am not to hate him, and that he didn't. But I think everybody here knows he did. Perhaps you didn't know. Perhaps he didn't tell you. Nobody ever speaks about it here—'cept grandfather sometimes."

Marcia felt a strange chill creep over her. But she said quietly:

"I don't think you should talk about such things, little boy. It is evidently some foolish bit of local gossip—without foundation."

She was really speaking to herself, not to the child; but he seemed to follow her words, and he spoke gravely—almost like a man.

"He was killed, though—at Wold Hall—in the night. Grandfather says Mr. Drummond killed him, and that if he hadn't been a rich man he would have been hanged."

"That is nonsense!" spoke Marcia quickly. "Rich men do not get off like that in these days. He never did it—it is a lie!"

She spoke almost vehemently. The boy watched her intently.

"I like Mr. Drummond. He is kind to me. Mammy Ruth likes him too. But grandfather hates him, and he hates for me to speak to him. But I do—sometimes—when I can. I don't know whether it's true or not; but lots of people believe it."

Marcia could say nothing in response. She felt curiously numb and cold. But she would not betray herself before the strange child, who seemed to be regarding her with eyes of consideration and reflection. She made an effort, and tried to speak lightly.

"What is your name, little boy?"

"Mark Raleigh," he answered promptly. "I live with grandfather and Mammy Ruth at Hill Top Farm. Mammy Ruth is my auntie, but I always call her that. She likes it."

"Is your mother dead?" asked Marcia dreamily.

"She died when I was born. Mammy Ruth takes care of me. I can remember daddy. I was five when he—he—got killed at Wold Hall. Do you

want to see Wold Hall? I'll show it to you if you like to climb up yonder."

But Marcia rose hurriedly, and made reply :

"Not now, Mark ; I must go home. Perhaps I will come again and look at it some other time."

## CHAPTER VII

### HUSBAND AND WIFE

MARCIA had dressed herself early for dinner. She knew that her husband was in the house, though she had not seen him. Only that morning she had pictured his return. She had resolved to be on the watch for him—to meet him as he came in with words of welcome—with a smile; perhaps—who could say?—a kiss. Yet when the moment really came—when she heard his voice in the hall below—she sat very still, her hands tightly clasped, her face tense with a curious complexity of emotions, and she made no effort to go forth to meet him, and shivered a little at the sound of his tread up the staircase and along the carpeted gallery, the colour flushing her face a moment, and then leaving it very pale.

But he had not paused at her door; he had passed on to his own dressing-room beyond, where she now heard him moving about, and occasionally whistling a scrap of some tune to himself. She had entered that room earlier in the day, and had noted the extreme simplicity of its plenishings and appointments. It was in most marked contrast to the

luxury of her own surroundings, and with her own hands she had set there a great bowl of azalea and lily-of-the-valley. She thought of that now—wondering whether he would notice—whether he would guess whose doing that had been. She pictured his hands just touching the flowers—those hands which were so strong—so brown. Were they something more than brown? she found herself asking. Were they stained also with red?

The words of the child of the quarry haunted her horribly. She knew not whether to believe them or not, and the doubt was a species of nightmare to her. One moment she asserted fiercely that the whole thing was preposterous—some spiteful local gossip, which the Drummond family had very wisely and properly ignored. The next she was torn by conflicting emotions of uncertainty and fear.

Then she pulled herself up short, and declared that she was fighting a bugbear. Murder in these days could not be committed with impunity either by rich or poor. That some tragedy had happened at Wold Hall she could believe. This wild, strange country seemed a fit setting for deeds of sudden violence. But that Marcus was mixed up in the matter was absurd. Yet she knew that her heart smarted, and she wondered why, till suddenly it came over her that the sting of the matter for her lay in the fact that Marcus had concealed this matter from her. If he had come and told her that a baseless suspicion attached to his name, of which it was possible she might hear something away in the north, she



would have trusted him and dismissed the matter from her mind as an idle tale. But he had not spoken—he had not trusted her thus far—and she felt defrauded of her rights.

And yet, even as she realised the source of her pain, she felt the inconsistency of her plaint. Had she not boasted a hundred times to herself in her musings, and to Leslie when they had been talking together, that she had no illusions with regard to men; that she always expected hidden skeletons, and would never desire to have cupboards unlocked for her inspection? She had professed (and she had thought sincerely) complete indifference with regard to her husband's past life. She had never asked him any questions concerning it. Not volunteering confidences, she had required none on her side. She had professed all along that it was between them simply a question of barter. What, then, did it matter to her? Why need she care? Why could she not rid herself of the haunting questions of that earnest-eyed little boy: "Did you like to marry him? . . . Did he tell you about it? . . . I was just wondering how it felt to marry a man who had killed his friend."

Marcia started up, half afraid that her husband would show himself at the door of communication whilst these words were yet ringing in her ears. "Killed his friend!" Was such a thing possible? Why did men kill their friends?—for such things had been done before this in the world's history. Then into Marcia's mind there flashed that old

cynical proverb, "*Cherchez la femme!*" and as she passed out upon the terrace beneath, she felt her face flame with a strange mixture of emotions.

A firm footfall behind her caused her heart to leap up, and then beat with heavy, irregular strokes. She was leaning upon the wide balustrade of the great stone terrace, upon which so many of the lower windows opened. It faced south-west, and was bathed in a golden glory from the sinking sun. The sun was full on her husband's tall, stalwart figure as he approached, and made a sort of golden halo round her as she stood with her back to the sunset. She saw the light leap up in his red-brown eyes at sight of her; but her own face was very pale, and was set in irresponsive lines.

"Well, Marcia; you are better, I see. Have you been dull here all alone? I was very sorry it should happen so. But I had been away rather long, and things are a bit troublesome at the pits just now. I was not able to get back yesterday."

Marcia had surrendered her hands to his clasp, but she did not invite any warmer greeting, and after one quick, searching glance into her face, Marcus dropped her hands, and contented himself with standing beside her, leaning over the wide balustrade. She drew herself a very little away, and stood upright and rather rigid; her hands unconsciously twisted together in a nervously restless fashion.

"Of course you must attend to your work. That is understood. I should never wish you to neglect your duties. In this beautiful place there is any amount to do. I have not half explored it yet; and I suppose there are people to know in the neighbourhood as time goes on?"

"Yes; no doubt you will in time have a very considerable acquaintance. But distances are long, which puts rather a bar upon the trivial every-day hospitalities and sociabilities you are accustomed to in town."

"Well, I shall not regret that—for a time, at any rate. One gets tired of the daily tread-mill. And the country all round is beautiful, too. I went one ride this morning. I could see what endless possibilities it has."

They were summoned in to dinner at this juncture, and Marcus gave her his arm and led her into the beautiful old banqueting hall of the mediæval house. She had used a smaller room when alone, and was scarcely prepared for the superb dimensions and decoration of this ancient apartment. It had not been modernised save in respect of its rich velvet-pile carpet, and damask hangings. The stone tracery, the panelled walls, the timbered ceiling, with its heavy pendants at the crossing of the beams, must have looked almost as they did to-day three centuries before. Two great oriels, with windows to south and east respectively, broke the regularity of the vast apartment, and in one of these stood a round table set for two, and charmingly decorated

with flowers. It made a pleasant little dining saloon for husband and wife, where they could enjoy a certain amount of privacy, and not feel themselves lost in the vastness of their surroundings.

Soft-footed servants passed to and fro, and everything was done with a faultless precision and exactitude. Yet Marcia almost wished for more stateliness and formality. She had a feeling that her cool aloofness was more apparent than it would have been had they been seated far apart at the extremities of a longer table. Not that Marcus appeared to note anything amiss. He was not a talkative man; but he never let the silence become oppressive. There were a good many questions to ask and answer; and at last came the one which Marcia was expecting, and which suddenly set her heart beating at a higher rate of speed.

"And where did you go this morning when you rode out?"

"I went first to a little village called Three Brooks. And then I took a bridle-path up a hill. I meant to get to the top and look over the crest of the ridge; but it was hot, and I did not get so far. I stopped at a stone quarry on the hill-side."

Was it her fancy; or did some slight flicker of uneasiness pass across her husband's face? She was in the mood to fancy anything, she knew, and she held guard over herself in consequence; but she was almost certain that there was a slight constraint in his next words.

"You did not choose the prettiest way. Three

Brooks is a poor little place, and from there you soon get into ugly, grimy districts. I must get out the ordnance survey, and mark you out the pretty rides—if I do not take you them myself. You will not care for the proximity of the pits.”

“I don’t know. I like to see what the world about me holds. I thought the ride up the rugged rocks very interesting. Another day I must go right over the ridge, and see what lies behind.”

She was certain now that she saw uneasiness in his look. A cold weight seemed to fall upon her spirit. She had never before noted just that expression in her husband’s eyes.

By this time the servants had handed dessert, and had quietly left the room. For the first time in their lives Marcus and Marcia Drummond were quite alone at their own table—in the juxtaposition which would be theirs for a number of years stretching indefinitely out before them. This was the thought in Marcia’s mind as the silence of their *solitude-à-deux* fell upon them; she raised her eyes half timidly to her husband’s face, and saw his sombre, their glance seemingly turned inwards.

“Marcia,” he said, as their eyes met, “I want to ask you not to ride alone again in the direction you did to-day. I mean, not to cross the ridge to the north as you spoke of doing. If you want to go there, I will take you. I had rather you did not go alone.”

“Why not?” Her lips felt dry and her throat parched.

"I have two reasons. One is that the pits lie across that ridge—not very near, I admit; but still you soon begin to get into the district of the collieries; and the men there are rough, and there are times when they are not on friendly terms with their employers, and I should not like to think of your riding alone and unattended into any of their little settlements."

"I had not intended going near the pits or collieries, but only exploring the rocky, picturesque country I saw so many glimpses of, and which seemed to grow more wild and beautiful as I mounted higher."

"Yes, I understand the feeling. I will take you there myself one day. But I would rather you should not go alone. Near the top of the ridge, just on the other side, there stands a lonely old farmhouse. A rugged old dalesman lives there—Ebenezer Raleigh by name. I should prefer that you did not encounter him. He has a grudge against me, though for my part I respect the old fellow, and wish him well. But he is a strange man. I would rather you kept out of his way. You are my wife—" He paused, and a shadow seemed to flit across his face. "He might be rude to you. He might—" Again Marcus paused, and seemed to sweep her face with a glance like that of a searchlight. After an almost imperceptible pause, he concluded his sentence—"frighten you, if you met him alone."

"I do not think I am nervous," answered Marcia, speaking with a level and even voice in spite of the

heavy beating of her heart. "I should not easily be frightened."

"Perhaps not; but I should not wish my wife exposed to any sort of—annoyance or insolence."

Marcus spoke in a curious tone, in which inflexibility of purpose was certainly the dominant note. He held his head a little rigidly and high; there was an undoubted gloom in his eyes. This was an aspect under which she had not seen him before. She looked for indications of confusion or of shame, and detected none. But then this man was not one to wear his heart upon his sleeve. His face was no open book for all the world to read. Perhaps the wonder was that his resolute and inscrutable face betrayed so much of sombre perturbation as she was able to read there as it was.

"You understand, Marcia? You will not go there again without me?"

The note of authority in his voice sounded strange to Marcia, who had early emancipated herself from direct obedience to commands, and who of late had been treated with an adulatory consideration. It kindled a little sparkle in her eyes; but the next moment she remembered her vow at the altar—her still unbroken resolution as to her duties; and she answered quietly and coldly:

"I understand. I will not go there alone."

His face cleared, and he seemed then to catch something of her mood; for his expression softened, and he rose and crossed over to her side, putting once more a hand upon her shoulder.

But this time the touch was unwelcome, and Marcia rose quickly to avoid it.

"You do not mind my asking this?" spoke Marcus. "It is only one ride out of so many!"

"Oh, no; I do not mind that! How absurd if I did! It was not so specially beautiful. I mean, I daresay there are dozens of ways quite as pretty. Does that bridle-path lead to Wold Hall, Marcus? Is it the road you take when you ride over?"

"It is one road, and I sometimes take it; but not very often. I generally go the longer way by the road, because you can make the circuit of the ridge quicker than you can cross it. And there is another bridle-path, not quite so rough, which I more usually choose if I am in the mood for a scramble. I will show you that some day. Or if you will come to the library, I will get out the great ordnance survey map, and show you the whole district."

She followed him willingly; it was something to do, and it would rob them of the sense of *tête-à-tête* awkwardness which might otherwise overtake them this first evening.

The study, which had been Sir Robert's sanctum, was furnished with a sombre richness which the son had left undisturbed, though again Marcia noted the exceeding plainness of her husband's personal accessories. The great maps were taken from the cupboard and hung against the wall, and she studied them closely.

"I see that Hill Top Farm and Wold Hall are



not so very far apart. Is the farm your property Marcus?"

"Oh, no; it is the freehold of the old dalesman. And there is a deep ravine and this dense wood between. My property begins on the far side of the ravine. But you see this other road circling round. That takes you to Wold Hall, and I will trace you the other bridle-path too. You have no need to go near Hill Top Farm to get there—if ever you want to come."

Marcia stood with her eyes upon the map, and made no response.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

"THERE is a mystery," said Marcia to herself. "He has a secret which he is hiding from me—which he wishes me not to discover."

She had spoken words like these in her heart many times during the past week—that week which she and her husband had spent together at Falconer's Hall, during which time she had come to know her new home very thoroughly from end to end, and to be unceasingly struck with the costliness of her surroundings, which bespoke a lavish expenditure that sometimes almost took her breath away.

And yet, in some merciful fashion—presumably because Lady Drummond came of a good stock—vulgar ostentation had been avoided. Sumptuousness there was, together with an almost enervating luxury, but taste was everywhere visible, and a harmonious note was preserved throughout. Marcus disclaimed any active personal share in these matters. His own tastes were peculiarly simple. He transacted business in a room which resembled an anchorite's cell rather than one of the apartments in his house. Even the study came

in time to wear a different aspect. Hangings were removed, and maps and charts and diagrams took the place of pictures and curios. These were all very well in their place, he would say, but in his own room he wanted air to breathe and room to move freely. Somehow Marcia liked to watch the transformation he gradually made in his own independent surroundings. There was something breezy and virile about the personality of this husband of hers. Sometimes her heart suddenly went out to him—she knew not how or why. But like an ugly snake across her path, suspicion raised its head, and darted forth its forked tongue, and she shrank back again into herself.

“He does not trust me. I do not know now that he even loves me. He wanted me for a wife—and he has got me. But he keeps a secret from me. There is a mystery—and he tries to prevent me from finding it out.”

She was alone again to-day. Marcus had gone for two nights to Wold Hall. This was a thing which must often happen, she knew. It had crossed her mind to suggest accompanying him ; but the words had died away on her lips. Why should she wish to go there? What would he think of the suggestion? If he wanted her, surely he was man enough to say so. If he did not—

The mere thought was enough. Her pride rose in arms at once. Wold Hall and Hill Top Farm—near together as the crow flies, though sundered by wood and water—enshrouded for her some secret, some mystery, which was gradually drawing a veil

between herself and her husband. But when she put this thought into words, she gave herself an impatient shake.

"As though I expected his confidence! As though I ever asked it! Was I ever fool enough to think that a man's past life would ever lie open to the eyes of his wife! What have I to complain of now?"

For the suspicion which was slowly growing upon Marcia—how or why she could scarcely have explained—was that her husband had led in the past (and would perhaps continue to lead) something of a dual life.

It was only from a few very small items of intelligence that Marcia was constructing her airy fabric of theories. She was not one to ask questions of servants, or gossip with her own maid. But this woman, who had known her from girlhood, and had been specially sent to look well after her young mistress in fresh surroundings, was not averse to imparting such items of local gossip as she heard, and spoke quite freely about the general satisfaction felt that "the master" had married and settled at Falconer's Hall, and had given up that strange, wild life in his bachelor quarters amongst the fells and coal pits.

When Marcia remarked that she did not think "the master" ever had been wild, the maid hastened to qualify her statement and try to retract the word. It was plain that she and her world admired Marcus, and feared him a little. Then a revulsion of spirit



would come over Marcia, in which she was ready to hate herself for the suspicions which she was constantly formulating in her own mind.

Would he ever speak?—or would she? Why she did not ask a question and have done with it she could not say. Perhaps her pride withheld her. To-day, as she mounted her pony once more and rode out, she wondered what he would say should she suddenly present herself at Wold Hall; wondered whether in such case he would suspect the other motive of which she began to be conscious—the desire to watch him, to read the riddle of his life, if such a thing existed; or if not, to assure herself that there was no secret between them. She would not admit, even to herself, that she wanted to be near him—that she missed him in his absence.

Yet without his companionship she felt a little lost. He had ridden with her almost every day so far, showing her much of the picturesque and rugged beauty of the neighbourhood. He had chosen their route. He had enlivened the way by picturesque details respecting the people and the places they passed or sighted. His former silence was broken in a fashion she was scarcely prepared for. He showed himself a master of graphic word-painting and humorous anecdote. He knew these people of dale and fell—knew them through and through.

“I come from the same stock,” he once said quietly to Marcia. “My great-grandfather worked in one of the pits here—just as a common miner. That blood-tie is a very strong and compelling thing.

It gives me the pull with my men yonder. They know that I understand them. They cannot bamboozle me. It does not always make for affection ; but it inspires respect."

He had never suggested taking her to the pits, and she had never made the proposal. Now she had taken the opposite turn out of the gate from the one she took when she rode to Three Brooks. But yet she had a purpose in her mind. Marcus had told her of that other smoother though longer bridle-path, which led eventually to Wold Hall across the ridge of the fell. He had not taken that direction himself upon their rides ; but Marcia had traced the route carefully on the map before starting to-day. She did not mean to go as far as Wold Hall, but she had a great curiosity to see it with her own eyes. She reckoned that if she crossed the first ridge and followed the track which led from the ridge of the fell in a westerly direction, she would presently crest a rise from which—if she read the map aright—she would be able to see the old stone house on the hill, which she had made Marcus describe.

The path was not hard to find, for it followed the course of one of the many trickling streams rising in the high lands, and finding their way by leaps and bounds to the lower lands beneath. It was a beautiful ride, through plantations of oak and ash and larch, with here and there a great group of stone pines with their ruddy trunks, casting a denser shade than the fairy green of early summer could do. As she topped the fell, however, the trees grew thinner,


and finally disappeared altogether, and she came out upon a bare upland. The air was like new wine, and Marcia felt her blood coursing in her veins. Riding was rough, and she felt herself longing suddenly for Marcus to be with her to tell her the names of all the great tors and headlands which rose up in a wild panorama before her eyes. She thought that she understood something of the secret of her husband's strength. He had grown up amongst such scenes as the one she was gazing upon. The life of the fells was somehow imbibed into his very being. He was a true son of this rocky wilderness. Why need she fear for him or for herself? Could his nature harbour any thoughts of disloyalty towards her? Was she not suspecting him without cause?

"I did not know how foolish I was when I said I cared nothing as to his past," spoke Marcia quickly to herself, "nor how like other women—from Bluebeard's wife onwards!"

Crossing the ridge and a great stretch of wild fell, Marcia came to a spot where the bridle-path forked. The right-hand path seemed to keep to the high ground, passing round a belt of fir-trees, whilst the left took a downward trend, and entered a picturesque gorge which seemed suddenly to open before her as she chose this route. The path turned and twisted many times, and she heard below a sound of falling water. Suddenly the left bank of the wooded gorge seemed to fall away, and she looked straight down from a lofty height upon a wide expanse of lake,

lying in a deep blue stillness beneath the summer sky. It was not really a large piece of water, but it might measure a mile in length, and perhaps rather more than half as much in width. It was formed, as she afterwards came to know, by the junction of several streams meeting in a dip between the ridges. Out into the lake jutted a promontory of perhaps fifteen acres in extent, and upon this peninsula a house had been built. It was a good deal concealed in trees, and looked as though the surrounding garden had been laid out with care. The house as seen from above appeared to be low, covering a considerable extent of ground. She wondered who lived there, and whether Marcus knew the place. He always told her he had been little into society; but then this house was on the Wold Hall side of the ridge, and might not be so very far away—at any rate, as the crow flies.

Some feeling of curiosity drew Marcia onwards and downwards. The path was rather steep; but the pony trod it fearlessly. In ten minutes she had come a great deal nearer the level of the lake; soon she was skirting it, was approaching the tongue of land which joined the peninsula to the mainland. She saw that this tongue was fenced, and that a gate was set in the fence, though there was no lodge to guard the entrance or to warn away trespassers. Marcia found herself pausing at the gate and looking up the brown pathway strewn thick with needles of fir and larch, and wondering what land lay beyond, when suddenly a tiny white-robed figure





—looking like a fairy, with a tangle of golden curls framing a face of extreme beauty—came rushing towards her, making vehement gestures to her to advance; so that Marcia, with her hunting-crop, had unlatched the gate and passed through before the child dashed up to her.

It was a little girl this time (Marcia felt as though all her solitary rambles ended with an encounter with a strange child)—a little girl whose pale face and dilated eyes bespoke a great and pressing terror. Marcia instinctively slipped from her saddle and had her arms protectingly round the little one before a word had been spoken. She gazed about her, as though expecting some ogre or monster from the thicket to appear in pursuit of the fugitive.

The child got her breath with a gasp, and words came tumbling out, scarcely intelligibly at first, though Marcia was quick to catch the drift.

“Oh, have they sent you to help? Have you come first? I saw somebody riding down the hill. I thought—perhaps—it was the doctor. Only he lives the other way. But he goes all over. He might pass. I rushed out to call him. Oh, have you seen him? Have you seen him? Leacock has gone to fetch him—but he lives so far away. Mrs. Leacock is ill. I’m all alone, and I’m frightened. Do come and help me! Suppose he were to die—”

The child was shaken by a tempest of fear and grief. Marcia understood this much from the broken words: Somebody was ill—the attendants

or servants were not available—the little one was left alone with the patient, and had appealed to the first passer-by for help. Marcia clasped the child's cold hand in hers and hurried towards the house.

"Is it your father, darling?" she asked.

"No; it is Best Beloved," answered the child, running fleetly onwards, leading the way; "he is not often ill. He was getting better. But to-day something happened, and it is so dreadful! I know a little what to do; but I never had to do it alone. Please come and help me. He mustn't be left alone. I only ran out because I was sure I heard a horse coming!"

Marcia felt like one who dreams as she hastened through these unfamiliar grounds in the wake of the white-robed child. It was the strangest adventure upon which she had ever been launched; and she sought in vain for any glimpse of light upon the obscurity.

"What is your name, darling?" she asked, as they approached the house; but all the answer she got was:

"He calls me Sweetheart, and I call him Best Beloved. Please come quickly! We can talk another time."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RECLUSE OF THE DEN

THE house which Marcia saw before her, as she let herself be hurried onwards by the eager and excited child, proved to be a very picturesque structure, built in bungalow fashion, with long frontages and deep, shady verandahs ; and at this season of the year every pillar and support of the verandahs were wreathed in climbing roses or other luxuriant creepers, the whole place seeming embowered in greenery.

The child had darted on now in advance. They had approached the house from the east side, where was the entrance door, with a gravel sweep leading to it ; but the child did not enter that way. She pulled Marcia round the angle of the building towards the south front, where the sunlight lay hot and bright, save where the deep verandah gave shade ; and now running rapidly onward in front, she turned another corner, and by the time Marcia had followed her, she had disappeared within the open windows of one of the western rooms, to reappear the next moment, urgently beckoning her new-found friend to follow her.

Marcia felt like one who dreams as she stepped across the sill into the big strange room of this strange house, and suddenly found herself in presence of its master, of whose very existence she had been unaware half an hour earlier, and whose name was still to be discovered.

But one glance was enough to show her that the child's alarm and agitation had not been uncalled for. The man stretched upon the wide couch against the further wall, with closed eyes, and a face drawn by suffering, and ghastly pale, was evidently in the grip of some acute attack, which Marcia instantly guessed to be cardiac in character. Of illness in general she had but little experience, but her mother had suffered all her life from spasms of the heart, and something in the expression of the stranger's face, and the attitude in which he was lying, and the character of his short and painful respiration, convinced her that his attack was of a kindred character. And this conviction was strengthened as she glanced at the contents of a small table drawn up beside him. She recognised instantly one or two powerful restoratives which had been employed in her mother's worst attacks, and which she had herself administered; and without hesitation she proceeded to mix a dose for this unknown patient, the little fairy-like child watching her movements with eager and approving eyes.

"Yes, yes!" she cried, in an approving whisper; "that is always what they do, and how they do it. Only Best Beloved has told me not to touch those

bottles myself, and I'm so afraid of giving the wrong one. But you understand—you are grown up."

And then as Marcia approached with the glass in her hand, the child threw herself down on her knees beside the couch, crying in a tender and appealing little voice :

"Best Beloved—oh, Best Beloved!—open your eyes and look. I've got somebody to come and help; I said I would. It's a beautiful, beautiful lady on a horse, and she will help to make you well."

The sound, if not the sense, of the child's words seemed to penetrate the faculties of the sufferer; the face quivered slightly, and the lids were lifted just a little from the hollow, cavernous eyes. Marcia slipped her strong arm beneath his head, and said in a quiet, authoritative way :

"Try and swallow this if you can; and I think I can make your position more comfortable."

He obeyed, and she, by an exercise of strength and dexterity, and assisted by the little girl, who moved cushions deftly under her direction, changed his posture to one which she was certain would give him greater ease. Her practised eyes saw that the worst of the attack was over. The breath came without those stabs of agonising pain, and the colour began to be slightly less ghastly and livid. The little one, breathlessly watching, clasped her hands in an ecstasy of relief, and pressing up to Marcia's side, whispered with passionate gratitude in her voice :

"He will get better now. You have made him better."

Looking down with a great pity in her eyes at the trembling child, who, now that the extreme urgency of the moment had passed, was beginning to suffer from the reaction, Marcia realised afresh the peculiarity of the situation. Here was she in an unknown house, that seemed to be absolutely deserted, save for a man who had been near to death during the past half-hour, and a little child of scarcely six summers, who looked utterly unfit to be left to cope with such a situation, or witness so much suffering and peril. What was the meaning of it all? Who were these persons, and why did they live in such isolation in this water-girt home? At least, she felt it impossible to leave the pair in their present condition, and with her arm close about the little girl, she looked from the sweet, appealing child-face towards that of the patient, to trace whether there were any close resemblance between the two.

As she did so, she became aware that not only was the sufferer a younger man than she had at first supposed, but also that he was strikingly handsome, with clearly-cut features that a sculptor would delight to model, and an expression which, could it be caught and transferred to canvas, would be the making of an artist desirous of portraying a Sir Galahad or St. George, or some kindred subject.

"He looks like a man who has learned how 'to suffer and be strong.' I wonder who he is—and what his history has been?" said Marcia to herself,

as she sat with the child in her arms, waiting for the next scene in the drama. Somebody had gone for the doctor ; so much she understood ; and some other person in the house, who would naturally be with the sick man, was ill herself, and thus the child had been left in charge, and had been the spectator of one of those terrible spasms which Marcia had witnessed occasionally in her mother's case. It certainly would be impossible to leave the child and the sick man until help should have come. She must remain with them during the interval ; but she thought it probable that the man might never be aware of it. The exhaustion following upon one of such attacks often keeps the patient in a semi-conscious condition for hours.

Then suddenly Marcia became aware that a pair of dark eyes had opened and fixed themselves upon her face. The recumbent figure moved itself very slightly, and at that moment the child, uttering a cry of delight, slipped down from Marcia's knee, and precipitated herself upon the patient.

"Oh, Best Beloved—you are better!"

Deep down in the hollow eyes a very sweet light seemed to flicker. The man's hand was laid upon the child's sunny curls ; but his glance was bent questioningly and wonderingly upon the face of the beautiful stranger, and Marcia spoke quietly, as though there were nothing peculiar in the situation:

"I was passing by, and your—little girl—came running out, thinking it was the doctor come. As

she seemed frightened, and in trouble, I came with her. I did not like to leave her alone. I hope you will pardon the intrusion."

"You have been very good," he said, in that curious low tone which results from physical exhaustion. "I am ashamed you should have been troubled; but I thank you—for the child's sake. You are Lady Marcia Drummond."

She was surprised at his recognition, and her eyes showed it. He spoke as though she had asked a question.

"I have seen your photograph. Marcus Drummond is the best friend I have."

Marcia was surprised and relieved at once. Feeling as she did that some mystery encompassed this man, she wondered perhaps whether her husband would approve her action towards him, though she trusted both the reasonableness and the generosity of Marcus. But if this man were his friend and intimate, and lived so comparatively near, why had she never heard of him? Marcus always seemed to her to lead a somewhat lonely existence, and to be independent in a remarkable degree of the ordinary friendships of life. She tried to recall the names of such persons as he had mentioned to her, but none that she could recollect seemed in any way to connect themselves with this recluse.

"I am Percival Eastlake," he said, after a brief pause, as though divining her thought.

Certainly she had never heard that name before, and though she bent her head in acknowledgment,



her face perhaps betrayed as much, for after another brief pause he added:

"I am something of a recluse, Lady Marcia ; my health is against me just now—and there are other reasons too. Your husband is the best friend I have ; but I have seldom been to Falconer's Hall—not for a long time now. He comes to see me, and sometimes I go over to Wold Hall. But I am not a society man."

Speech was plainly a little difficult to him still. Marcia regarded him with her curiously level and direct gaze.

"It is quite right," she said quietly. "I understand. If you are a friend of my husband's, that is enough. I am glad if I have been able to do you any small service."

"She made you better, Best Beloved," spoke the child, who had looked from one to the other as the brief dialogue proceeded. She was evidently one of those children whose minds develop rapidly through constant association with their elders. She spoke with a command of words unusual at her age, and comprehended what she heard as few children would have done. "She knew just what to do, and you got better. Don't let her go away till the doctor comes."

"I am very much obliged to you," spoke Percival Eastlake, in a low voice. "It is most unusual for us to be so short-handed here. But my man's wife happens to be ill herself just now, and their son, who also works on the place, is away volunteering for this

week. It is an unfortunate combination of circumstances. Generally we have plenty of power to meet emergencies; haven't we, Sweetheart?"

She nestled up to him, and looked up at Marcia.

"I'm glad you belong to Mr. Drummond; he's the next nicest man in the world after Best Beloved. When he told us he was going to get married, I didn't much like it. I thought perhaps he would not come and see us so often. But it hasn't made any difference; and now you will come with him, won't you?"

She looked up coaxingly, as a child unused to a rebuff. Marcia could not but smile as she answered:

"I will come with pleasure, if my husband and your father approve."

"I am not her father—I am her uncle," spoke Percival, still holding her fast; "but she belongs to me now—doesn't she, Sweetheart?"

The child's arms were about his neck; her little face was pressed against his. Plainly she had no better wish than to belong to him altogether. It was possible she did not even remember her own father.

"He can call himself what he likes," she said, looking up at Marcia through the dark fringes of her long lashes. "He is just Best Beloved—and nothing else."

At that moment sounds of footsteps outside indicated the return of the servant with the doctor, whom Marcia knew by sight. He hastily stepped



into the room, and looked with wondering eyes at her, as she stood drawing on her gauntlet gloves. But she volunteered no explanation of her presence as she passed him with a little bow, and the child ran after her, perhaps at a sign from Percival, and walked beside her towards the gate, where her horse had been left tied up.

"I'd like to show you our garden; but we'll wait till Best Beloved is better. We live on an island—except just for this road that joins us to the land. Our house is called The Den. Sometimes Best Beloved and I play at being lions, and driving everything else out—only there isn't anything to drive; we have to make that part up."

"Have you lived here always, dear?"

"Oh, no—only since Best Beloved brought me. It seems an immense while now; I don't know how long it is. Before that I lived with mummy and daddy—oh, ever so far away over the sea! I can't much remember where it was; but it was an island, too. There was water all in front—only it was the sea. And then mummy got ill, and then Best Beloved came; and things were very—" the child paused, and a curious look of pained bewilderment passed across her face—"I don't quite know what they were. Best Beloved won't ever let me talk about that. And then he brought me here with him; but he was very, very ill, and Mr. Drummond came and fetched us both. Sometimes I call him Uncle Marcus; but he isn't my uncle really—and Best Beloved said perhaps I was getting too big to

to do it any longer. But I love him next to Best Beloved of all the men in the world," and the little one made a gesture as though to indicate that her experiences were immensely wide and varied where mankind was concerned. "I expect he's told you all about it," she concluded suddenly; "perhaps more than Best Beloved tells me."

Marcia smiled, but said nothing. In her heart she was wondering why it was that Marcus had told her nothing of this story that was evidently not lacking in interest, nor in the elements of romance. She felt, as she mounted her horse at the gate, the little child holding it fearlessly as the rider dexterously made use of the gate for a mounting block, that she wished Marcus had told her, or would tell her the story of Percival Eastlake. That he was the hero—or victim—of some curious and romantic tale she felt certain; and she would have preferred that he should proffer the information rather than that she should seek for it.

"Good-bye—and please come again soon!" cried the child as Marcia gathered up her reins and kissed her hand in farewell. "Give my love to Uncle Marcus, and tell him to bring you very soon again. You'll want to know how Best Beloved is, won't you? And you can help to make him better—like I do. He says I do; but I don't think I'm as clever as you!"

Marcia made no definite promise, but kissed her hand once more, and rode through the gate, hesitating a moment, but afterwards turning her

horse's head along the way which led from Falconer's Hall. After all, this interlude had not occupied much time, and she had the day before her. She might yet obtain a glimpse of her husband's former home before she abandoned her purpose. She would not attempt to reach the house that day. She did not think seriously that she had ever really intended that. But she would like to see what manner of place Wold Hall was; and so she rode onwards and upwards.

Soon she heard a sound as of horse's hoofs approaching from the heights. It was a very lonely road, and Marcia, town-bred girl that she was, felt a little nervousness of which she was half ashamed. All the same, she turned off from the road, and forced her way into a little thicket of stunted trees and bushes, where she felt sure of remaining unnoticed by the approaching horseman.

But she from her screen of branches could mark who approached, and she gave a little start of surprise at sight of the rider. It was Marcus, her husband; and perched in front of him on his saddle was the little boy she had met in the stone quarry upon her first expedition, who had told her strange things and asked strange questions.

The child's face was rather curiously set; and though Marcus was evidently talking to him, Marcia heard no spoken word in response. Spell-bound she gazed, wondering at the sight. Was it possible that Marcus had ever caused the death of that child's father—his own friend? And was he seeking to

make amends by kindness to the boy? She followed them, fascinated, with her eyes, till the horse turned in a few minutes later at the gate out of which she had lately ridden—to the house of Percival Eastlake!

## CHAPTER X

### THE STORY OF PERCIVAL EASTLAKE

"SO you have found your way to The Den, Marcia?"

Marcus spoke these words rather suddenly upon the evening following his return, after his brief absence from Falconer's Hall. Dinner was over, and they had gone out upon the terrace; for the evening was very warm, and both of them preferred the freedom and sense of space which was theirs in the outer world to the confinement of the house, even in their large and sumptuous rooms. Marcia used to say to herself sometimes that it was their very sumptuousness which oppressed her. But when Marcus stood beside her, all this fell away as though it had no place in her world. The strength which seemed to emanate from the silent, self-contained man banished all else as by its own inherent force, and whatever of uneasiness she might feel in his presence, there was no sense of loneliness or emptiness in her surroundings.

She had wondered whether he would speak of this thing. She had been debating in her own mind whether she herself should mention her adventure. When she had quitted The Den, kissing

her hand to the fairy-child who dwelt there, she had been full of her intention to lose no time in telling all to Marcus. But when she had seen him ride into the gate—that other child in front of him—her purpose had wavered. She knew it had suddenly become strangely difficult for her to speak a word upon the subject. It became at once shrouded in that mystery which dogged her steps and seemed to be enveloping her life. She slightly turned her head and looked at Marcus.

“Who is Mr. Percival Eastlake?”

“I expected you to ask me that question before, Marcia.”

She looked straight before her, her head held a little high.

“You had never mentioned him to me, though he appears to be a near neighbour and an intimate friend of yours. I was not certain, therefore, that you desired us to be acquainted; and as I suppose you know, it was a mere accident that took me there.”

“A most fortunate accident, by all accounts. Eastlake’s health is still in a very precarious state. Those heart attacks, though much more rare than they were, are attended with danger whilst they last. He never ought to be left alone when one is threatening; but just then it was inevitable. Medical aid had to be summoned. Your appearance at such a juncture was providential.”

“I hope he is better,” said Marcia, a little formally, still looking straight before her.



"He has a bad few days before him. It is a case of abscesses forming. Each one, we hope, will be the last ; but the poison, or whatever it is, in the system seems difficult to eradicate. He is just the wreck of what he was two years ago, before he went out to the West Indies. Doctors say he will get over it in time, and be a sound, strong man again ; but the day does not seem very near at hand yet. I wish it did."

"Is that why he shuts himself up like a recluse ?"

"Partly ; but there is another reason. It is that which has made me silent about him hitherto, even with you. Percival Eastlake feels as though a cloud rested upon him. He is not under a cloud in the ordinary acceptation of the term. Nobody in his old neighbourhood believes a word against him. We know him too well. Yet, for all that, he feels as though some stain rested upon him, and this, together with his shattered health, makes him live the life of a hermit. But a better and a truer-hearted fellow never breathed. Let the world say what it will, that is the truth."

Marcus spoke quietly, but with that ring in his voice which Marcia liked to hear ; it brought with it such a sense of power and confidence. She drew a step nearer to him, and asked with interest :

"Can you tell me the story, Marcus ?"

"Yes ; for I told Percival I must do so now, and he assented. A man may not have secrets from his wife."

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She looked suddenly at him, a curious glow in her eyes. "Is that so, Marcus?" she asked.

He seemed to read her thought—at least, to answer what he believed to be her thought, for he said :

"You see, Marcia, so long as you knew nothing, things were on a different footing. Eastlake's existence was unknown; he had no interest for you—was, in fact, non-existent. So long as that was the case, I respected his rather morbid shrinking from new friendships or acquaintance—I said nothing to you of him or his story. But now that you have learned part, it is right that you should know all. That is what I mean by having no secrets; though even so, I must have had Percival's consent before speaking. One must not betray trust, even to one's wife."

She said nothing. She had turned her face back to the western sky. The light was rapidly fading. It was not easy to read her expression. Marcus, leaning over the balustrade a few paces off, was wrapped in his own train of thought, and spoke on in the terse, graphic fashion habitual to him when he set himself to the task of explanation.

"There were two of them once—Roland and Percival. Percival is one year younger than myself. Roland was several years older. We were comrades in boyhood. Old Mr. Eastlake was a retired Indian civil servant. He had made some money. He had lost his wife, and he wanted to live a life of retirement. He bought that almost island, and built the


roomy bungalow house you have seen. He and his boys lived there, and the boys went to school and college in the ordinary way, but were always very fond of their home—especially Percival. Roland cared less for the place; but there was a magnet. Estelle Enderby was one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. She was a girl then—curiously alone in the world—though she had a little fortune of her own. She was very distantly connected with the old dalesmen families of these fells and wolds, many of whom, despite their roughness now, have come of a good stock, and have blood in their veins of which such parvenues as myself might be proud. When Estelle Enderby was left an orphan, she came to live with the Dugdales, of Dale Farm, and the Raleighs, of Hill Top, who are connected by marriage. Sometimes she stayed at one house, sometimes at the other. Roland Eastlake fell violently in love with her—loved her in that head-long fashion which carries all before it. When the old man died—old Mr. Eastlake—he left his estate to be divided equally between his two sons. Roland was angry. He had expected to be made an eldest son, and to have the lion's share. I think that was the beginning of his ill-will towards his brother. A little later, and this was much intensified by a suspicion he conceived—that Percival and Estelle Enderby were secretly attached."

Marcia had become curiously interested in the narrative. She was looking full at Marcus now.

"And was it so?" she asked.

"As the woman is dead, and as you are my wife, Marcia, I will say to you what I am convinced is the truth. Percival never cared for Estelle Enderby otherwise than as a friend, and the betrothed of his brother—his future sister; but I do believe that the girl herself, though carried away by the headlong vehemence of Roland's wooing, would, had she been let alone, have cared more for Percival. You can scarcely realise now, perhaps, what a singularly attractive man he was a few years back. You may feel the winning charm of his personality even now; but when it was coupled with the strength and grace and vigour of his youthful manhood, it was irresistible. And he, regarding her in brotherly fashion, never suspecting any conflict of feeling on her part—for he was younger than herself, and in some respects youthful for his age—treated her with intimacy and affection, and ended by stirring up the hot jealousy and ill-will of Roland, who, however, had the grace to be somewhat ashamed of himself. He used to explode to me, and to be called a fool for his pains. But the situation was intolerable at last, and he cut the Gordian knot by marrying Estelle out of hand, selling his share of the property to Percival, and taking himself and his wife away from the place, and living for a while a life of travel in far countries, which I think was agreeable to both.

"But there was a hot-headed strain in poor Roland which worked him woe again and again. He got into trouble through his violent temper; and he took to drink, which in hot climates is a most fatal thing



a man can do. They settled in a West Indian island, where the child was born, and where for a while things seemed to go well with them. Then suddenly, two years ago, whilst I chanced to be abroad, Percival had a letter from Estelle, imploring him to come over to them. She was ill; her husband had got into bad company. The climate was trying the child, and she had nobody to help her. Had I been here, I might have advised Percival to be careful; but he thought no evil. If he had ever suspected Roland's jealousy, he had forgotten it by now—regarded it as completely a thing of the past—a phase that had ended. He did not hesitate one moment. He made his preparations, and went out to them. A few months later I had a telegram from him, asking me if I could come. I did so. I found Roland and his wife both dead, and Percival lying at death's door. A mystery hung over the whole episode; but that some terrible tragedy had been enacted could not be doubted."

"Marcus, how terrible! What do you mean?"

"Of course now I know all—or almost all; for even with me Percival speaks only with great reserve about the scene which has brought him so near to death. The people on the place, as I could plainly see, believed that the brothers had fought, and that they had come near to killing one another. But there was no evidence, and Roland's death was certainly due directly to other causes, for he was seen to leave the house in the early hours of the morning, and to walk down to the shore and plunge into the surf,

as he not infrequently did for his morning bath. When his body was washed up some hours later, one leg had been bitten off by a shark ; but there was no evidence whether this had occurred before or after death by drowning. Percival was found terribly injured and quite unconscious, and though he recovered sufficiently to send me the message I received, there was a relapse almost immediately afterwards, and when I arrived there his life was despaired of."

" And the wife, Estelle, and the little child ? "

" I have told my tale badly—in a topsy-turvy fashion. The poor young wife had died almost immediately upon Percival's arrival, and the innocent little child was in part the cause of the terrible scene which followed. She was with her mother when Percival, hurried to the house by the servant she had privately sent to meet him (for she had not dared to tell her husband what she had done), entered the room, and the dying woman—for in truth she was dying—held out her arms to him with the possibly half-delirious exclamation : ' Best Beloved ! ' The little one, slipping down from her coign of vantage, ran to warn her father of the arrival of the stranger ; and all she was able to tell of him was that he was like ' daddy,' and that her mother had called him ' Best Beloved.' Roland, not entirely sober—he seldom was, I fear, in those days, though for the child's sake he observed a certain decency up till nightfall at least—hurried to his wife's room, to find Percival with her. But the look upon her face held

him back from violence then. She was dying ; and before Roland had appeared she had confided the child to Percival's care. He had promised that come what might, he would not leave the little one alone with her father. I truly believe that this was all the mother desired in asking him to come. She must have known herself to be a dying woman, and though in her weakness there might have been a moment of self-betrayal, yet it was at a time when all earthly things were slipping away. But Roland nursed the grudge, and drank harder than ever to drown his grief in his loss. And when Percival approached him in respect to the child, who was visibly growing white and frail and sickly in that torrid climate, then the floodgates of his wrath were opened ; and if murder was not done in the house that night, it was due to Percival's forbearance, I take it, rather than to any other cause."

"And yet you speak of him as under a cloud?"

"I say that that is how he feels about it himself. His brother opened his eyes to the vile suspicions he had cherished respecting his feelings towards Estelle. Unhappily, in his drunken bouts he had betrayed these to his boon companions, who regarded Percival with askance. He was not guilty of his brother's death—that was not charged against him ; but he was held to have driven him to desperation which had resulted in his death ; and when I arrived upon the scene, it was to find that Roland was extolled as the victim of a conspiracy, of which Percival was the villain."

"Shame!" spoke Marcia quickly.

"Yes, to those who know the whole story it is; but a man like Roland makes many friends of like calibre with himself, and to such men a character like Percival's is as a sealed book. Well, he did not die, as was expected; but he was frightfully injured internally, and although it is more than a year ago since I brought him back to The Den with the child, he is still the partial wreck you see him. All the same, he is gaining ground, and the London men who have seen him say that in time he will make a good recovery. The cardiac trouble is only the result of other injuries, and when one is overcome, the other will cease to recur. But unluckily, Percival heard enough from servants and others to know what was whispered against him over yonder, and he feels even yet as though some sort of slur attaches to his name. It is a morbid feeling which will pass away, I have no doubt, as he regains tone; but it has made him keep himself very closely secluded, and as complete quiet and freedom from care and worry are prescribed for him, one cannot combat his desire after a hermit's life. Still, I want to see him begin to come out of his shell again, and for that reason I am glad of the chance which threw him across your path. I hope you will go there again, and that now we may succeed occasionally in getting him to Falconer's Hall."

Marcia was looking away into the darkness which had now quite fallen.



"It is bad for the child to grow up without playfellows. Has she nobody of her own age to associate with?"

There was a slight but quite perceptible pause, and then Marcus's answer was spoken.

"There is a little grandson of Ebenezer Raleigh's with whom she plays sometimes. They are by way of being friends."

"A farm-house child? Is it quite suitable?"

"Estelle wished it; it is one of the charges she laid upon Percival, when he promised to take the child home with him. Estelle Enderby and Ruth Raleigh were friends—almost sisters. I have told you that these dalesfolk are not like the ordinary run of farmers. Their children are encouraged to be friends also. Besides little Mark, I do not know that she has any other playfellows; but she is perfectly happy with Percival."

Marcia said no more aloud; but in her heart the words kept forming themselves with mocking iteration: "A man may not have secrets from his wife."

And Marcus had spoken those words himself not half an hour ago!

## CHAPTER XI

### A MASTERFUL MAN

WHETHER or not Marcia had married a man about whose past career some mystery lay shrouded; whether or not she was to be faced by some enigma of a more or less haunting character, at the moment she had little time or solitude in which to think out the situation or decide whether or no she should seek to unravel the riddle; for the social world of the neighbourhood had begun to understand that Marcus Drummond had brought his wife to Falconer's Hall, having foregone the ordinary month of wandering which has become so universal in these days; and people of any social standing within a radius of many miles were eager to pay their respects to Lady Marcia Drummond, and see for themselves what manner of wife the young colliery owner had taken to himself.

Rather to Marcia's surprise, her husband almost always appeared in the drawing-room when visitors arrived. She had not asked him to do this, making sure it would bore him, as he had never been what the world calls a society man. But it so happened that during the influx of callers who drove up to

Falconer's Hall when it had become an established fact that its owners were in residence there, Marcus was able to devote a good deal of his time to his wife. His pressing business at the pits was settled for the present, and though from time to time he rode across, it was generally in the early morning—often long before Marcia was astir—and he was back for lunch as a rule, and ready to help her with her callers in the afternoon, if he were not driving her out.

Marcia was possessed of very keen powers of observation, and she was quickly made aware that her husband was almost more of an object of interest to these guests than she was herself. Also, it was self-evident that Marcus, though he had lived all his life in these parts, was almost as complete a stranger to the social world of the locality as his stranger bride.

In a sense people knew him, having known his parents before, and having memories of him as a child. But it was plain to Marcia that during the years in which Sir Robert and Lady Drummond had lived at Falconer's Hall, and Marcus had remained at the old home near the pits, he had practically become a stranger to these people who now welcomed him back amongst them with a certain quite perceptible curiosity and satisfaction. Marcia often saw women regarding him with scrutinising glances, as though taking his measure, or passing him under review, or correcting their impressions of the unknown man by comparison with the strong personality before them.

Many spoke to him tentatively about Wold Hall, yet always at the first with an air of caution, as though they feared to tread upon debatable ground. Marcia could not but admire the fashion in which he met all inquiries—with open brow, unlowered voice, without the trace or hint of hesitation which they seemed to expect. And yet he never seemed to tell anything—to betray anything—if there were anything to betray. If Wold Hall held a concealed skeleton, no knowledge as to its existence was ever betrayed by Marcus. There was a virility and masterfulness about him of which his wife was increasingly conscious. If he mentally set up a barrier of "thus far and no further" with his interlocutors, Marcia was perfectly certain it would never be overstepped, though it might have been as invisible as the line which marks the turn of the summer's tide.

Once or twice she had an impression that she herself was subjected to a certain tentative cross-examination. Women would ask her with looks of curiosity whether she had visited Wold Hall as yet, and when she answered in the negative, seemed to regard this as evidence of something; they never betrayed what that something was. Some expressed in low and earnest tones, and with an impressment which Marcia found vaguely disquieting, if not irritating, their satisfaction that this solitary bachelor life had been abandoned.

"It does not do for a young man to shut himself up all alone in a wild place like that," spoke one

matron, with a little emphatic pressure of fingers upon Marcia's arm.

"We are all so glad that that solitary life has ended. It cannot be good for anyone; and strange things so often happen under strange circumstances," another had remarked.

Marcia, her head held just a little high, would reply to these and like remarks that she saw nothing very strange in her husband's having remained on at his boyhood's home near the pits, where his work lay, after his parents had removed to Falconer's Hall. Even now he was constantly wanted at the colliery, and it seemed quite a natural thing that he should keep on the house there.

The point was never argued further; but she was conscious of curious glances levelled at her, and was certain that had she known these people better, or had her quiet dignity and aloofness not held them somewhat in awe, they would have loved either to tell her something or to ask her questions themselves—questions which she vaguely guessed at, and to which she knew she had no answer to give.

She noted also that if ever Marcus heard any talk of Wold Hall, he would cross the room and come to her aid, and invariably her interlocutor, whoever she might be, would change the subject with a haste that was more suspicious than the former questions.

Marcus was becoming a more dominant factor in the life of his wife than Marcia had ever supposed

he would in her dreams of the married state. When the time came for her to return the calls of the local magnates, it was her husband who drove her hither and thither behind his pair of mettlesome blacks, whose vagaries might well have made havoc of the nerves of a woman prone to fear, but whose hot tempers were so firmly curbed and controlled by the strong arm and inflexible will of the man beside her, that Marcia was never conscious of so much as a thrill of fear, but was far more aware of a sensation of triumph and exhilaration.

Sometimes he would bend a searching look upon Marcia, and ask, after some tussle with the snorting, excited creatures :

“Are you the least afraid?”


And her answer was always the same :

“Not in the least. You are their master. I can feel that all through—and so can they.”

“If I were not, you should never sit behind them. I run no risks with my greatest treasure.”

At words like these, rare on Marcus's lips, Marcia would become conscious of a strange thrill running through her frame. Did he indeed regard her in the light of a treasure purchased by his gold? Or was that word the symbol of a deeper meaning which at this moment she was not prepared to receive.

“A man who loves his wife does not keep secrets from her,” was the cry of her heart, as more and more she felt that her husband's life held its secret in which she had neither part nor lot. But then she would pull herself up with a feeling of scorn



## The Secret of Wold Hall

that she had used such an expression even in her own thoughts. Why should she think of love between them, in the ordinary acceptation of the word? That was not in the bond. He had not promised her his confidence. What right had she to ask it? But then he need not have mocked her by the words—"A man must not have secrets from his wife." He had a secret—and she knew it.

Driving home one late afternoon, when the wild beauty of the landscape held her entranced, and she sat dreaming as she gazed over a wide vista of magnificent country, clothed in gorse and heather, and glowing in that indescribable liquid radiance that marks the decline of day amid the fells and scaurs of the north, Marcus suddenly pointed with his whip towards a distant ridge, and said:

"If your eyes are good enough, Marcia, you can see Wold Hall from here, and the pits lie just over the ridge. That wreath of vapour hanging in the sky comes from the works there."

Marcia shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed. She fancied she just discerned, dark against the sky, the gables and chimneys of some distant building. And she spoke sudden unpremeditated words.

"I want to see Wold Hall, Marcus. Will you take me there?"

"Of course I will. I did not know you would care to see it. It is not a fit place for you to stay in; but you can visit it any time you like. I will take you there with pleasure. I never supposed you would care about seeing it."

"You stay there often. Is it fit for you?"

"Certainly. I am fond of the place. I am a bit of an anchorite in my tastes. When my father and mother left, they took away with them all the fine things which my mother had begun to collect about her. I did not regret one of them. The old furniture remained—bought when such luxuries as are common now were not dreamed of amongst manufacturers and master men, which is all the Drummonds could call themselves. Wold Hall is not a lady's bower, but it is a comfortable place enough for a single man."

"Or a married man—without his wife."

He gave her a keen, quick look, as he replied :

"Exactly so."

"I want to see the pit village also," went on Marcia, a little hurriedly, after a moment's pause, which seemed somewhat charged with meanings that she could not define. "I have never seen a colliery. I sometimes feel as though I had never seen anything. I have lived my life in drawing-rooms, or with my own thoughts. That is not enough. One finds that out by degrees. I want more."

She scarcely knew what made her speak so. She was looking out straight before her towards that blue wreath of filmy vapour which indicated the presence of the human hive of industry from whence the wealth was drawn which enabled her to live her life of ease and luxury, and to know that the worries and anxieties that beset those whom she loved were set at rest by her own deed. Marcus bent one of his own keen, vivid glances upon her, but he did not



## The Secret of Wold Hall

directly reply. He only said in his ordinary tones :

"You shall certainly see the pit village if you want; but it is neither a beautiful nor edifying spectacle. It is a blot upon the face of Nature—though it has its own grim charm for some eyes."

A few days later, and husband and wife rode together towards the pit village and Wold Hall. Marcus had not been there alone since that talk. Marcia had observed this with a certain satisfaction. He made no preparations for her reception. He told her she must take "pot-luck" there at mid-day with him, on whatever the old housekeeper chanced to have to offer.

"She is very deaf, and rather blind ; but a faithful old soul, who is perfectly trustworthy. Her husband was crippled in the pits by an accident. He potters about the place, and grows a few vegetables in the garden. Flowers, save the hardiest, will not flourish. There is too much smoke and grime in certain drifts of the wind. It is a queer old rambling house—hall is far too fine a name for it as the term is now used ; in olden days it carried less weight, as no doubt you know. Originally, I suppose, it was just a farmhouse, and was added to by various owners. But it is not a large house even now ; more curious and rambling than really spacious, and of too grim an exterior to be truly picturesque. I like it, but I do not expect admiration from others."

"And did you live there alone all those

years, with only that decrepit old couple to look after you?"

There was just a perceptible pause before Marcus answered:

"Oh, I was not always alone. I had my visitors sometimes; and there was always Falconer's Hall within an easy ride. I had my work, too. And that took up the chiefest part of my time. I believe our friends thought of me as living an almost savage life—but it did not seem that to me."

She looked at him with a sudden curiosity. A question had almost sprung to her lips. Did Marcus divine it? He turned his face full upon her for a moment; in his bright brown eyes there was a strange intensity; and his jaw was very curiously set.

"Is there anything you wish to ask me, Marcia?" he queried, with that inflexible note in his voice which she heard from time to time, not always conscious of its cause; "because any question of yours I will answer—you having the right to ask what you will. I do not satisfy the impertinent curiosity of strangers, as perhaps you have already noted; but with my wife it is a different matter. If now, or at any time, you desire to ask anything of me—if you hear anything which seems to you to require explanation—you have only to put the case before me—you shall have your answer. I have not troubled you with details of my past life. I have no reason to suppose they would interest you. I am

not coxcomb enough for that. But anything you wish to know, it is your right to know. You have only to ask. I am ready to answer."

Marcia was silent for a moment. A curious conflict of feeling was stirring her. Pride urged her to maintain silence. After a strange, tense pause, she replied, with a quietude that sounded almost like indifference:

"Thank you; but I do not think there is anything I want to ask. When I do, I will remember what you say."

"Do so," he replied; and then they rode on for a long while in silence, occupied with their own thoughts.

They passed straight through the little village or township of Three Brooks, which Marcia well remembered; but instead of taking the bridle-path upwards, as she had done on that occasion, they kept to the road through the valley, crossed the river by a wide stone bridge lower down, and then, instead of being forced to scale the spur of the fells, they found a great gap through which the road ran, which led them by a circuitous but easy route into the colliery village itself.

It was a curious colony, set amid the wild scaurs of the hill-side—row upon row of small stone houses, planted down like mushrooms, scarcely any of them having any enclosed ground round them. The men, of course, were either in bed or down the shafts, and women and children sat beneath the shade of their walls, busy or idle as the case might be, but paying

singularly little heed to the passing by of the two riders. No one greeted the master with a curtsey; few of the urchins in the roadway even touched forelocks. All the colony did was to stare extra hard at Marcia, and occasionally a woman would nudge her neighbour, and utter quite audibly a rough surmise that that was the master's new wife, some wondering in equally loud tones how she liked her bargain.

In and about the pits themselves there were smutty colliers to be seen engaged with trolleys of coal, running hither and thither along metal lines, or coming to and fro from the office or pumping house, or preparing fresh shifts to descend into the yawning black shafts. The place seemed humming and throbbing with a life quite mysterious to Marcia; and as the foreman came out and spoke to Marcus, she moved her horse a little way from them, and gazed about her in wonderment. What huge men these were! What strong giants of toil! Was it the black on their faces which gave them such a sinister aspect; or did they really look threatening and scowling? One great fellow, just come up from his shift, and stepping along the roadway as he marched away from the strange-looking cage which others were entering, lurched heavily against Marcia's horse as he passed, and some of the grime upon his clothes left a stain on her pale grey habit skirt.

The next instant Marcus had stretched out his hand and brought his hunting crop across the

fellow's shoulders with a sounding thwack. A growl and a snarl like that of a wild beast was the instant result, and for a moment Marcia thought the giant was about to spring at her husband's throat. But Marcus sat and looked at him, and spoke in a clear, incisive tone:

"Go home, Job Lake, and never let me see you misbehave yourself like that again. You have been warned before. This is the second offence. For the third—you go!"

Marcia was aware of a humming sound like that of a gathering tempest muttering in the distance. But Marcus paid no manner of heed to it. He just finished his conversation with the foreman, and then turned quietly to his wife, who, after this episode, had pressed close to his side, and said briefly:

"Now, if you are ready, we will go to Wold Hall."

## CHAPTER XII

### WOLD HALL

MARCIA was glad when they were clear of the vicinity of the pits. Something in the aspect of those great brawny sons of toil struck her as both sinister and threatening. Her quick ears caught mutterings which sounded like maledictions as they passed by. She was aware of something electric in the very atmosphere. Unconsciously Marcia had conjured up pictures of Marcus's kingdom over here amid the pits, and had fancied that amongst his subjects of toil he would not be a king alone, but something of an idol. He always spoke as though his interests lay here, as though his life's work lay amongst these men. Why, then, did they seem to regard him with distrust and with hatred? Surely, surely he was a just and a righteous master, even though he might be a man of iron—or of bronze, as Leslie had said; which sobriquet Marcia often recalled as she watched her husband during his daily round, and the oftener she recalled the name, the better it seemed to fit him.

His face was quite unmoved as they rode along a track from the pits which took them direct to the

wide fells. As they left behind them the traces of grime and smoke, Marcia looked up into his face and asked quietly :

"Why are you so unpopular there, Marcus? I had thought they would have loved you. You have always chosen to live amongst them, and to make yourself master of every detail of their lives. Your father and mother told me that. I thought they would have appreciated and understood that sacrifice."

Marcus regarded her with his curious smile. That smile always seemed to bring into stronger prominence the inflexibility of the square jaw, though the lighting of the eyes softened the sternness of its moulding.

"My days of popularity appear to be past just now," he said. "I have been the idol of the hour—now I am the tyrant and blood-sucker, who ought to be overthrown and suffered no longer to cumber the ground. There are ups and downs in this world with us all, you know."

Her interest was fully aroused.

"What do you mean, Marcus?"

He looked at her squarely, as he had done upon that day when he had wooed her after his own unique fashion.

"Do you really care to hear the tale, Marcia?"

"Of course I do!" The words sprang to her lips before she had time to reflect, or before her cloak of pride and assumed indifference had time to fall about her again. She saw the ruddy gleam in his

eyes which bespoke an emotion she could not classify. And then he spoke, after his fashion, in terse, brief sentences and phrases.

"You are right in saying that I have always lived amongst them in a sense. From a child the pits fascinated me. As a growing lad they fascinated me more. I grudged the time spent at school and college. I was happiest here. I studied the working of the mines, the lives of these men. When my father began to have other irons in the fire, and talked of selling this property, I pleaded to retain it. Gradually it practically passed into my hands. I knew every man amongst the hands. I counted them in measure as friends. They thought of me as a friend, I believe. We had fewer troubles here than other pit owners. I used to think, in my youthful inexperience, that we were to be exempt from those things which happen elsewhere.

"You remember the great coal crisis a year or two back? Ours was one of the few pits which did not close. Our men live somewhat isolated from the world. We have always paid good wages. That is a part of my father's success in his undertakings. He expects good service, but he pays its equivalent. He has grown rich, but to gather riches with undue haste has been no part of his purpose. Well, let that pass; we need not discuss the ethics of the question of capital and labour. Enough that our men did not strike. Instead, we worked night and day shifts, and our coal poured into the empty market and saved many a mill-owner from ruin, and many a home from



starvation. Of course, we raked in large profits too. Prices had run up enormously. The men knew it. After a short time they became discontented with their regular wage. A deputation waited upon me, and demanded a wage upon the sliding scale principle."

"Was there anything unfair in that?" asked Marcia.

"Not if it is fairly worked. And I was not unwilling to entertain it. But, as I explained to the men, if the principle were adopted, it must rule for a period of not less than five years. If they were to have their share in the extra profits accruing from the coal famine and dislocation of the market now, they must take their chance of what was to follow in years to come. It must be done for five years—or not at all."

"They saw the reason of that, of course?"

"I am not sure that the miner ever sees reason as we see it," answered Marcus, with a grim smile. "But, at least, they agreed to the proposition. I offered them (knowing that prices must rule high for some while, whatever happened) either a small but permanent advance in wages irrespective of the fluctuations of the market, or, if they preferred it, the sliding scale of wage, to be continued for five years. They accepted the latter. It has been in operation ever since. It gave them a considerable harvest for a time. But miners are not a thrifty race. There was a great deal of pigeon-flying and pigeon-fancying. There was a marked increase in

dogs of all sorts—good dogs, mind you—that were coursed one against the other ; and too often, I fear, set to fight each other, too. Things hummed merrily (as your world puts it, Marcia) for a year or more, and then the markets began to right themselves. Wages declined first to the normal state, and just latterly they have fallen a small fraction below, and considerably under what I had offered the men, had they been willing to accept the permanent rise which the harvest of the coal strike garnering in my coffers would have enabled me to give for a long while had they not elected otherwise. Of course, now they want the former conditions back, with the rise also, if possible ; and because, until the expiration of the five years, I decline even to discuss the matter, I am regarded as the tyrant and the oppressor of the poor.”

“Oh, Marcus, how unfair ! Do they not see themselves how unjust they are ?”

“I cannot tell what they feel, or would feel were they let alone. But latterly some demagogues have got hold of them, and are urging them to strike, or do something of that nature, to force my hand. To do the fellows justice, I don't think they want this of themselves. With all their sullenness at the moment, they know I have been their friend in the past, and that I shall neither be coerced nor intimidated. They do not want to strike. They know that in such case they, and not I, would be the sufferers and losers. But there is a nasty temper among the men, and they let me know it. We have

crises which want firm handling, and that is why I cannot be long away from the pits."

"But they will not hurt you, Marcus?"

He gave her a quick, keen look. The note of anxiety in her voice had rung out in spite of her.

"I think not. We say of those fellows that their bark is worse than their bite. They growl and grumble; but I think it will go no further. Anyway, I will take care that you are not annoyed or alarmed. You understand now why I do not bring you to Wold Hall, except as a visitor. But here we are; here is the grim old place! It does excellently for bachelor quarters; but I would not have my wife so near the pits. Hallo! there is Percival here before us! I asked him to drive up with Sweetheart, to make up a party at luncheon. Let me take your horse to the stable, Marcia, and old Nat will give them a feed. Here is Eastlake to look after you whilst I am gone, and to do the honours for me."

It was not what Marcia had expected. She was not sure that it was what she quite liked; but there was no helping it now. Hardly had she slipped from the saddle before the little fairy in white, who had been regarding her shyly from beneath her golden locks, made a dash towards her, and was received with open arms. The child's soft arms were about her neck, and the little sweet voice was speaking in soft, caressing accents:

"Best Beloved said that my Beautiful Lady would be here; but I didn't scarcely believe it. You weren't ever here before!"

And then Marcia rose up to give her gauntleted hand to the tall, pale man who advanced slowly, with a smile upon his face, saying, after they had exchanged greetings:

"I have wanted to apologise again for the unwarrantable demand made upon you the other day. I always feel ashamed every time I think of it. You were very good to the child—and to me. I thank you sincerely. Strangers, without claim—"

"A frightened child has a claim upon the whole world," responded Marcia quietly; "and you are my husband's friend."

There was something in her tone which seemed to declare the matter closed, and Percival changed the subject by asking:

"Is this your first near view of Wold Hall?"

"Yes; I have not had time to come before. What a strange place it is, set down as it were in the midst of all this wilderness! I think I rather like there being no enclosure of garden ground round it. It gives it an air of savage remoteness which is in keeping with the country in which it is set. Do you know the house well?"

"Yes, very well. We played together here as boys—Marcus, my poor brother, and I—" He made a little pause, as though other names had sprung to his lips, but had been held back.

Marcus returned from the stable, and threw open the wide doors for them to enter. Sweet-heart still clung to Marcia's hand as they stood within the square flagged hall, whose roof reached

the timbered gable, lost in shadow, and intersected by great beams. A stone staircase ran up to a gallery above, and dark corridors branched off towards different portions of the house. With ringing footfalls, Marcus led the way into a very plain square room, where an oak table was spread with a cold repast. The dark panelling of the walls harmonised with the old oak furniture; but of picture or ornament there was no trace. The party sat round the board, and a wrinkled old crone brought in sundry additions to the repast; but Marcia felt like one who dreams, as she sat at the table and heard the talk passing between Marcus and Percival. She was conscious of the charm of manner belonging to her husband's friend. He interested her, even whilst her mind was engrossed in wild speculations. He tried to draw her into the talk, to explain allusions, to amuse her with anecdotes; but Marcia could not readily respond. The house oppressed her. She felt as though it held within it the elements of some tragedy. Perhaps in that very room—she would not follow out the thought; but it robbed her alike of the desire to talk or to eat, and she was glad to escape with the child into the sunshine without, leaving the men to enjoy their conversation, and smoke together and without fetter.

Sweetheart knew the place well. She had a favourite little hollow of her own, where, hidden from the house behind, they could look over a deep cleft in the hill-side towards a lonely-looking

homestead opposite, and pointing at it with her little hand, the child remarked :

"That's where old Ebensneezer and little Marcus live!"

Marcia had observed that the little one spoke of and to her husband as Big Marcus. Now she looked at her and asked :

"Who is little Marcus?"

"He lives there," and Sweetheart nodded her head sagely. "He's a little boy. I play with him sometimes."

"I thought that little boy's name was Mark," said Marcia.

"It's Marcus really," spoke the child, "after Big Marcus. Old Ebensneezer wanted him called Mark. But his daddy wanted it to be Marcus—after Big Marcus, who was his great friend. Little Marcus has told me all about it. He used to be called Marcus, except by old Ebensneezer, who always said Mark. But now everybody calls him Mark. After his daddy died, old Ebensneezer wouldn't ever let him be called Marcus again. If anybody does it—he just swears!"

Marcia was looking out straight before her. Sweetheart looked up into her face, and cuddled a little bit nearer up to her. Living a motherless life, and scarcely ever seeing a lady, she seemed irresistibly drawn towards Marcia, although the latter was not one of those ostensible child-lovers who seem unable to keep their eyes or hands off a little one.

"What's you finking about, Beautiful Lady?" she asked.

Marcia looked down, smiling, and tried to shake off her fears—that intangible fear of some tragedy which might yet throw a shadow across her path.

"I was only thinking about what you told me, Sweetheart," she said. "Who is old Ebensneezer, as you call him? Do you know him yourself?"

"Oh, yes, very well. He likes me. He tells me tales; but Mark says he can be very cross sometimes. I try to call him Mark now, 'cause he's frightened I should call him Little Marcus before old Ebensneezer. He says some day he'll tell me why he won't have him called Marcus; but he finks I'm too little to hear now. Do you know?" asked the child suddenly, looking up into Marcia's face.

"I am not quite sure if I do or not," answered Marcia, speaking very slowly.

"You are bigger than me. Perhaps they would tell you. Big Marcus knows, and so does Best Beloved. But he won't tell me." The child sighed a little, and snuggled up closer into Marcia's arms. "That's the worst of being a woman; I remember muvver used to say so. Men won't tell you everything—only what they want you to know. They like you to tell them everything, but they keep fings back themselves."

The child was speaking dreamily, as though rehearsing some half-forgotten scene of the past. Marcia felt a queer little thrill run through her

as these quaint reflections dropped from the unconscious baby lips. Did men indeed keep things back? Was Marcus just as other men in this respect? And yet, had he not told her that very day that she might ask him what she would?—and she had not done it. Was it trust, or was it fear, or was it pride which had held her silent? Marcia herself could not tell. It seemed to be a mixture of the three.

Later on the men joined them, and Marcia was taken over the old hall. It was a strange echoing place of empty or half-furnished rooms, dust and cobwebs lying thick in some, whilst others were kept passably fit for habitation at such times as Marcus stayed there. The dining-room, and an office room beyond, and a bedroom beyond that, were the ones he mainly used; and these were stamped with the impress that Marcus left upon all his surroundings—the simplicity of the anchorite, together with a due appreciation of the use and fitness of everything about him.

For the rest, it was a ghostly sort of house, about which any number of traditions might grow up; yet no allusion was made by either of the men to any tragedy having been enacted there, and Marcia was unable to say whether it was the presence of the child which imposed reserve, or whether it was the result of agreement.

They went home by the other route, which took them past the gate of The Den, where they said good-bye to their two companions in the light pony



cart which had brought them. Then they rode on almost in silence to Falconer's Hall, both seeming to be engrossed in thought.

On the hall table there a yellow envelope lay awaiting Marcia, and when she had opened and read the telegraphic despatch, she uttered a little cry of pleasure, and handed it to her husband. It was from Leslie Moncrieff, and ran as follows :

"Plans suddenly changed. Could come to you at once on visit, if agreeable. Write and say."

## CHAPTER XIII

### LESLIE INTERVENES

"LESLIE!—this is delightful of you!"

"I'm so glad you find it so. At least, I'm not quite sure if I am really. But let that pass for the moment. I wanted to come. That is the fact of the case. I have been chaperoning your mother most religiously. She is really a very attractive woman still, and wants a filial eye kept upon her! She stood in awe of you, Marcia. Yes, my dearest, you do inspire awe in the breast of the matron and the dowager. You are so much maturer than they want to be! It has a depressing effect upon their juvenility. You know how it is when a baby with great, solemn, staring eyes gazes at you when you laugh, as though to inquire (more in sorrow than in anger) what in the world makes you so frivolous in this very solemn world. A baby is too much for me. And a statuesque daughter with no private flirtations on hand of her own is too much for the modern mother. Not that your mother is that, in the ordinary acceptance of the term. But she did enjoy her little fling, when she had

done her duty by her beautiful daughter; and I helped her through nicely. But when your father was ordered to Carlsbad, I felt that my devotion had limits. Foreign watering-places I draw the line at. I expected to be going to the Standertons; but they have illness in the house, and put me off, so—"

"My dear Leslie, is all this to explain to me why you are here? Do you not think the simplest reason is that you wanted to come, and that I wanted you? Don't you remember that I asked you for an early visit before I was married at all?"

"Yes—or was it on the wedding-day—or both? And I told you I would not come till the autumn? Well, I did not think then that I would. I am not sure now that I approve of myself for being here. Young married people—"

"But Marcus and I are not young married people—not what is generally understood by the term, at least. And it is July, and if that is not autumn, we are beginning to think about it; autumn comes early in these northern regions, you know. Marcus and I have had two months of solitary—bliss. A little variety now will be welcome to us both."

Leslie looked rather keenly into her friend's face. Marcia had not pined—that at least she could see at a glance. She was looking well. She had a slight bloom upon her pale cheek that enhanced the beauty of her singularly pure complexion. Her

eyes were large and luminous, but the dark shadows which Leslie had seen round them during the days of the curious courtship and speedy marriage had all vanished now. Her figure was slight, as it had always been, but it was not thin or attenuated, and she moved with the graceful freedom of a perfect physical development.

On the whole, Leslie's inspection satisfied her ; but there was one point open still to doubt. Had the face become harder ? It was not easy to be sure of this, since Marcia's expression had always been calm, reserved, even enigmatic. Truth to tell, Leslie had experienced some qualms as to her own part in recent events. She had not sought in any way to bring about the match, yet she had sought to make it acceptable to Marcia. If she had not so persistently championed Marcus and his cause, might Marcia have drawn back, even at the eleventh hour ? Drawing back, changes of purpose, were not characteristics of the daughter of Lord St. Barbe. She had resolved upon the step, and she would probably have carried it through at all costs in any case. Still, Leslie felt anxious sometimes, though none would ever have guessed it from her gay and insouciant manner ; and at last an overwhelming desire to see Marcia in her new home, and judge for herself how it was with her friend, seized upon her, and taking advantage of a change in her plans, she had presented herself, and had met with a welcome warm enough to prove to her that her visit was well-timed.

They were in Marcia's own especial sanctum—an exquisite, octagonal room; its walls panelled in sea-green satin, shot with gleams of gold and opal, and set with plaques of delicate Sèvres china, after the quaint French fashion of another age. There were windows looking out in many directions over stretches of beautiful country, and there were long French windows opening upon a wide stone terrace, set about with great vases containing masses of flowering plants, from whence a flight of steps led to a sunk lawn of velvet smoothness, and a region of winding walks and brilliant flower parterres, with fountains and shrubberies, all cunningly combined within the limits of the half acre of ground enclosed within a wide and dense yew hedge, which went by the name of "The Lady's Garden."

Leslie's delight and admiration knew no bounds. She hovered like a butterfly around the treasures of the room, or darted out upon the terrace to exclaim at the beauties revealed there.

"It is like an enchanted palace, and you the enchanted princess!" she cried. "I wonder if you are half aware, Marcia, what a very fortunate person you are?"

Marcia flushed suddenly; but it was not at these words. She heard before even quick-eared Leslie the approach of a familiar footfall. Next instant Marcus, in his riding dress, had mounted the terrace steps, and was giving Leslie a welcome that she knew to be warm and sincere, notwithstanding the habitual quietude of his manner.

Marcia busied herself over the tea equipage, leaving them to renew acquaintance at their leisure. This was not difficult with a person of Leslie's vivacity and adaptability. She had liked Marcus from the first. His strong personality appealed to her. She was quick to recognise the distinction between the men who had worked in the world's great hive, and those who had merely lounged through life in idleness, killing time instead of using it. The conviction came over her anew that this was the husband of all others who had it in his power to win a spirit like Marcia's. Yet she instinctively felt that as yet this end had not been achieved. There was something between them. The barrier of reserve had not been broken down by the first weeks of married life. She did not think that either of them repented the step which had been taken. Neither wore the aspect of unhappiness or disappointment. But there was something yet lacking between them—of that she felt assured. Perhaps as time went by she might learn to understand what this lack was.

Both were glad that she had come. Of that she was made sensible from the first. Her liveliness brought a new element into the house. Her delighted admiration of the old hall and all it contained, her enthusiasm over the beauties of the world without, her appreciation of the wild, romantic scenery which Marcus loved, and which was throwing its spell over Marcia's spirit, acted like a tonic upon them both. Marcia's face took a brighter look ; Marcus shut himself up less in his business room,

and sought the company of the ladies at odd moments as he had not done hitherto. They walked and rode together, showing Leslie the beauties of the country; or he would drive them out long distances into the heart of the hills, and show them wild tors and caverns and tracks of ancient forest land about which weird and terrible legends clustered; and these stories he would tell with such a graphic power that Leslie often vowed she would really hear no more, they haunted her so in her dreams. Yet she was always the first to insist upon knowing what grim story was associated with each savage spot, and hung breathless upon the words of the narrator, never content till all had been told.

"I believe he remembers them all—I believe he saw them all with his own eyes," she once laughingly declared to Marcia, as the pair wandered one day alone amongst the fells behind the house. Marcus had gone over to the pits, and might be detained at Wold Hall for a night or a couple of nights. It was his first visit since Leslie's arrival, and she had declared to him that they would be horribly dull till he came back. Now that she and Marcia were alone together, she could not but speak of him in that half-bantering, yet half-serious way of hers that Marcia knew of old. "Did I not always tell you he was a survival? He belongs to another age—another life! Wasn't there a time when there were giants on the earth? I believe Marcus lived then. You feel the giant in him! I hope you are properly proud of

him, Marcia. I should be, if I had a husband like that!"

But Marcia was silent, and she did not smile. Leslie's words seemed to have struck a jarring note. A spasm of pain crossed her face, which the other was quick to see.

"Marcia, something is the matter. Can't you tell me what?"

Marcia was silent a long while, and then said slowly:

"I should like to tell you, Leslie. I have wanted to before. Sometimes I think that if I told somebody about it, the horror of it might go. But I do not wish to be unloyal to Marcus. And though I have tried sometimes to ask him, I have never been able to."

Leslie was silent, consumed by a vehement curiosity, yet anxious not to insist upon a confidence which might become a burden.

"You must do as you feel it best, Marcia. I would like to help you if I can. But I always believe that the husband is the person to help his wife best—especially such a husband as Marcus."

"You like him, Leslie. I see that. That helps me. You would not easily think evil of him?"

"I think I should find that very hard, Marcia. There is something about him that fascinates me oddly. I am not given to be fascinated like that. I think the secret of it is that I feel him a man to be trusted."



"Then I will tell you, Leslie. If you did not trust and like him I would not. But since you do, I feel I may. Perhaps you will see light where I cannot. Leslie—suppose—suppose—that you had married a man, and when it was done, and could never be undone—you found that he had been—or that people said he had been—the murderer of his friend, what would you do then?"

Leslie stopped short, and looked at her in amaze.

"What do you mean, Marcia?"

Then Marcia told her all; all those vague and formless suspicions which had been forced upon her since her arrival, first by the words of a child, secondly by her husband's manner as he spoke of the enmity of the old dalesman, thirdly by the curiosity and veiled allusions of friends and neighbours, and the questions or hints dropped by her maid, who, without hearing the whole story, had evidently gathered that some mystery encompassed the life of Marcus Drummond.

"He does not trust me, Leslie. He tells me nothing. He leaves me to hear whispers and to think dreadful thoughts; but he says nothing. I am his wife. I have the right to know the story of his past life—"

Marcia stopped suddenly short, conscious that Leslie's eyes were upon her, with a look whose meaning she thought she divined.

"You think, perhaps, I have no right to speak like that. I always said that I had no illusions about men—that I wished to know nothing about him in

the past. Leslie, when I said those things I was not married. I did not quite understand—"

Again she paused. Could anything ever fully explain to an unwedded girl that strange compelling tie of marriage? These two months had been a revelation to Marcia in a thousand undreamed of ways. But how could she explain—she who did not half understand her own sensations?

"Have you ever asked him anything he has refused to tell you?" asked Leslie.

Marcia was silent. Presently she answered proudly :

"I ought not to have to ask. I hate asking questions. I think I would rather remain in ignorance. If there is anything to tell, my husband should explain it unasked."

"Well," spoke Leslie reflectively, "let us look at the matter from his point of view. Marcus is proud too. Oh, yes, Marcia, you are well mated in that respect. He told you what he would give you if you married him. He has kept his word right royally. Never was woman more sumptuously treated. The bargain has been loyally kept on both sides. But this confidence—this harking back to the past was not in the bargain. If you do not ask, how can Marcus guess that you wish to know? And remember, there is a shrewd truth in the old proverb, '*Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.*'"

"You think he has not done it?"

"I think nothing about it at all. It sounds like the wild legend of a wild district. What I do say

and maintain is that if there were anything in his past life which you had a right to know before he married you, Marcus would have told it you."

Marcia said no more for the moment. Even to Leslie it was not easy to speak of the burden lying upon her spirit. She scarcely understood its nature herself. How could she hope that another would share it?

Leslie was thinking deeply. At last she spoke.

"I shall go to Hill Top Farm one of these days myself. I am not under any embargo. No one will know that I come from Falconer's Hall. If you do not choose to ask questions even of your husband, I at least need not mind doing so. If you want to hear what the story is, I will find that out for you, Marcia."

"I am not sure that I wish to know anything that Marcus does not choose to tell me," she answered, after a little pause.

And hearing this, Leslie smiled to herself, nodding her head in satisfaction. Her inconsequent and merry mood returned instantly. She began to rattle away, turning resolutely from the grim subject just discussed.

"It looks like a different world—an untrodden Eden—a place uncontaminated by modern civilisation. It must have been just such a place, fifty years ago, I should think, about which old Lady Lorraine tells her charming story. Have you ever heard it, Marcia? She was a young wife then, and

was rather out of health, and was sent to rusticate amid some such scenes as this. Well, the baby arrived rather unexpectedly up there; however, all went well, and before she quitted the place she presented herself at the little village church in the usual way. The parson was a queer old fellow, who had never churched a peeress in his life, and was mightily afraid of committing himself. You know the versicles. Well, it did not seem to him that they were quite suited to such an occasion as the present, so this was his rendering of one, given with a certain hesitation: 'O Lord, save this—ahem—countess, Thy servant,' whereupon the old clerk, rising gallantly to the occasion without any hesitation at all, responded: 'Who putteth her ladyship's trust in Thee.' Dear old man! I could have hugged him! I love to hear Lady Lorraine tell the tale. I wonder if you have survivals like that round about these parts?"

"I think not," answered Marcia, her face growing grave after her laugh; "I fancy about here they are very democratic and modern. I know that Marcus has a great deal of trouble with the pit hands. I only hope that there may not sometimes be danger too."

Leslie gave her a quick, keen look. "Danger!" she repeated.

"I hope not; but I do not know. I saw and heard things the day I was there with Marcus. Sometimes I wish he would never go to Wold Hall without me. It is a strange house—I had a strange

feeling in it. Oh, Leslie, I am glad you have come! I wanted somebody to talk to. Do find out if there is any danger menacing Marcus. Sometimes I think that is the only thing I really care to know."

## CHAPTER XIV

### A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

LESLIE rode up the steep bridle-path upon Marcia's sure-footed mountain pony, a look of purpose and resolution stamped upon her face, whose expression beneath its outward and habitual gay insouciance was unwontedly grave.

"He loves her—that I never doubted from the first moment I saw them together," she was saying to herself, "and he has set himself to the task of winning her love. Also, he goes about it in a fashion of his own, which I think must win the day. Marcia wants to love him, though she scarcely knows it yet. There is something about his strong personality which draws her—I am sure of it. But she is terribly proud, and her pride holds her back. Love was not in the bond. I do not think she knows yet how she is loved of him. She is hurt that he does not tell her what this mystery is. The game of concealment is a rather dangerous one for him to play with such a wife as Marcia, if he only knew it."

Leslie had been a fortnight at Falconer's Hall, and the time had passed on the whole gaily and pleasantly. Host and hostess were alike glad of her

company. There had been several gatherings both at Falconer's Hall (returning the dinner hospitalities received earlier) and at neighbouring houses in the vicinity. Leslie's charming toilettes and gay vivacity alike excited admiration. She was a wonderful foil to Marcia, and the public opinion of the place was perplexed as to how the palm of beauty should be allotted. There was no doubt about Leslie's immediate popularity. She inspired none of the awe that Marcia did. Moreover, she was not the wife of the man about whom so much curiosity was excited, and thus it came about (since Leslie's curiosity was vividly stirred) that she heard a good deal more of the floating whispers concerning Marcus Drummond than ever Marcia had done, or was likely to do; and what she heard perplexed her not a little.

One of her informants, a dowager who spoke without spite, and with both doubt and regret, had summed up the matter thus:

"It has often made me think of Stevenson's weird story of Jekyll and Hyde. I suppose many men possess something of the dual nature, and certainly the Marcus Drummond of Wold Hall, during the five years which he inhabited it alone before his marriage, and the Marcus Drummond who appeared from time to time at Falconer's Hall, or worked indefatigably at the pits, seem two distinct individualities. I am not a woman who believes all the whispers of a suspicious neighbourhood. You will find Marcus Drummond credited in many quarters with the power of riding across the fells, if not on a broomstick, at least

upon a magic steed, which bears him from spot to spot in an incredible space of time. Some swear that he has been seen in two places simultaneously, and though we are approaching the twentieth century, superstition dies hard in these mountainous regions, and there are many who believe that he has had dealings with the powers of darkness, and they will not go near Wold Hall after sundown. Of course, that is ignorant superstition ; but for all that, things have gone on there which are not creditable to its owner. But there, I will say no more. You are his friend and his guest—” And Leslie, knowing this, had refrained from asking questions, though her curiosity had been stirred to its very depths.

She was recalling all the things which she had heard as she rode up the path to-day towards Hill Top Farm. Marcus and Marcia had departed to a local function, where he had some official part to play. Leslie had declared her abhorrence of “functions” of any kind, and had pleaded to remain behind. But she had no intention of remaining at home. She had a project of her own to carry out. She knew the lie of the land now. She had not missed her way once. As she passed the old stone quarry, she recognised the place where little Mark Raleigh had first spoken with Marcia. There was no child there to-day. She rode on up to the top of the ridge, and once having breasted it, she saw the farmstead lying before her, its tilled fields and grass lands trending downwards



towards a deep gully, which separated it from the opposing ridge of the fell, where stood the grim house that Leslie well knew was the Wold Hall of sinister repute.

"I think I could understand that men might grow wild and lawless in such surroundings," mused Leslie, as she stood motionless on the ridge. "I should feel myself like a primitive man, and resort to primitive methods. Is it the wild life of these grim wastes that makes Marcus what he is—a survival of a different age? What has he done over yonder? No one will say exactly; but at least no one has whispered the hint that any woman has been injured or wronged. It seems a matter of drinking and dicing, of wine and high play, of wild spirits met together in a wild, lonely house, of hints of violence about which none will openly speak. No one has breathed the word murder to me; yet sometimes I have felt that it was trembling in the air. But perhaps at Hill Top Farm I may learn the truth. If any man met his death at Wold Hall, it was one of these Raleighs who dwelt here."

Thus mused Leslie, as she pondered upon her next move. So far as she knew, she was quite alone in this wilderness of fell and moor. She therefore started violently when a rough voice addressed her—a voice which seemed to proceed from the very ground at her feet.

"Be'st thou the wife of the bad, black-hearted man who dwells in yon evil house thee'st looking on?"

As these words were spoken, a strange gaunt figure rose from a nook between two great masses of stone, and Leslie saw before her a tall and grizzled old man, strong and muscular yet, though somewhat bent in frame, with eyes of fire and a voice which rose with a trumpet-like note in moments of excitement, whilst his rather long grey hair and beard gave to him the aspect one associates with the ancient bards of Cambria.

Leslie, after her first start of surprise, was in no wise alarmed at this encounter. Indeed, it suited her perhaps better than any move she could have made of herself.

"No, I am not Lady Marcia Drummond; but I am her friend. And why do you think badly of her husband? He seems a kind-hearted and upright man."

A strange wild laugh broke mockingly from the old man's lips. In his uncouth dialect, which Leslie had some ado to understand, he spoke again, his words coming as in a torrent of untutored eloquence, not without its own impressiveness.

"An upright man!—a man of a kind heart! Harken to that, ye spirits of justice—if justice there be in this world of ours! He who was welcomed from his childhood to this hearth and home! He who came and went at will—no son could have been better beloved than he! He called himself a friend; save me from friends of his kidney! He won the heart of my son. Aye, though Luke was a strong man in all else, he was as putty in the hands of

Marcus Drummond. He loved his wife. She was a gradely lass—a bonny bird. But let Marcus Drummond hold up his hand, and Luke would leave his wife for Wold Hall, or for the world's end if need be, at his bidding. Then the child was born, and the lassie died. Marcus Drummond played the part of friend and sympathiser, and the bond was closer and closer drawn. Yet I thought no harm. None had spoken a word against the lad; for he was but a lad in those days in my eyes, though I know now that he was waxing to man's estate."

"When was all this?" asked Leslie, as the old man paused for breath, as he flung a fierce gesture in the direction of Wold Hall.

"Eight years since the child was born. But from a boy that influence began which was to cause my lad's death. Five years ago Sir Robert and his lady wife—who had not been my lady long—moved from Wold Hall to the grand house across the fells; and Marcus stayed on alone. That was the beginning; but it did not come all at once. How it began I know not now. But little by little there came a change. I was blind for a while; but my eyes were opened at last. My son cared nothing for the land, cared nothing for the stock—scarce had a thought for his own child. A spell was on him—a spell of evil. He talked of growing rich—laughed aloud as he told of all the things which he would one day do, and how his boy should be reared as a gentleman—I know not what besides. But all the while, though I knew it not then, he was borrowing

money wherever he could lay hands on it. Raleigh credit was good. He was part owner of the farm and stock. He sold beasts, and, as I believed, put the money in the bank. But I saw little enough of him as the months slipped into years. Wold Hall had swallowed him up. What he did there I never knew—never shall know. Marcus was not there. He was at the pits till night; and yet—and yet—he and my son would be seen at all manner of strange hours, always playing, dicing, gambling—anything was good enough to wager over. Others were drawn in too, but not to that extent. There were nights when lights streamed out from yon windows till the dawn blotted them out. I have watched—I have seen.”

“But,” objected Leslie, “Mr. Drummond has always been a man of action and business. You can see in his face that he has not led a dissipated life. I cannot understand you. No one could burn the candle at both ends in that way and not bear the mark of it.”

“Marcus Drummond is not a man—he is a devil!” suddenly shouted the old man. “He is a devil, or he has a devil, and that devil served him well. Oh, they may talk and talk and talk! They had their alibi pat enough upon that night when my boy was done to death at Wold Hall. There was a dozen or more to prove that he was at Falconer’s Hall that night—had never been near Wold Hall. But we know better—we who saw him. These eyes, old as they are, saw him as plainly as I see you,

entering the house at dark. Others saw him too. If he cannot come and go on the wings of the wind, as some declare, and as I have a mind to believe also, he was here all the while, and it was the devil he serves who put it into the hearts of men that he was over yonder. But I ask of any sane man, answer me this: If Marcus Drummond were not there, how did my son meet his death? Tell me that! I asked it of the coroner's jury, who found Marcus innocent; who accepted the witness of those who swore that he was miles away from the place when the deed was done. What did they declare?—that there was no evidence how the man had met his death. Had Marcus been with him, they could not but have returned it wilful murder. There was a wound in his head. There was the trace of some struggle. The lamp had been overturned. There was evidence enough to hang ten men! But he was rich—and he could bribe! His father and his mother both came to swear his alibi. Who would listen to a few poor dalesmen who had seen him over here? It was dark, they argued. Some mistake had been made. If violence had been done—if it were not an accident due to intoxication—that was what they had desired to make it out; but not a soul believes that—then the guilty person must have been some stranger, who had forced his way into the house, or some boon companion admitted by my boy, knowing there was gold to be plundered. They robbed the dead of his character to save the guilty living—who was a rich

man. Oh, I know what you would say ; but you are of their class. We know better. Would it have been hushed up—would the testimony of truthful men have been set at naught if the Drummonds had not been rich and powerful? My lad is to carry a stained name to a dishonoured grave—for many things came out then, and I found myself a poor man where I should have been a rich one. But I know who led my boy to his ruin, and then struck him down to his death ; and I will dog him like a sleuth-hound till his doom is also accomplished, be the instrument what it will. Providence will place it in my hands in the day of retribution.”

Leslie shuddered as she listened. There was such a wild menace in the tones and gestures of this terrible old man. As he spoke these last words, he swung away from her, and still talking wildly to himself, plunged downwards amid the rough boulders, till he was lost to view. Leslie's pony, frightened, as it seemed, by something uncanny in the spectacle, broke into a canter, and dashed rapidly along the narrow track leading to the farmstead. The girl became aware then that a tall and rather majestic-looking woman, with grave eyes set wide apart, and an air of quiet dignity, accentuated rather than diminished by the plain farmhouse dress she wore, was standing at the gate to which this track led up, and was gazing at something, with her hand screening her eyes from the glare of the sunshine.

Next minute Leslie had pulled up her pony and had begun an apology ; but the grave-faced woman,

in whose eyes seemed to lie a shadow of haunting fear, interposed :

"Was it you to whom my father was speaking just now? I pray you, pardon him his violence. He has seen great troubles, and they have left their impress. But I am sorry if he has alarmed you ; he should not accost strangers with his tale."

"It was because I said I came from Falconer's Hall that he spoke," answered Leslie. "I told him I was the friend of Lady Marcia Drummond, and that her husband was also my friend."

"Marcus Drummond is a good, true-hearted man!" spoke the woman, in very earnest accents. "But my father cannot understand—it is not his fault. He cannot—he cannot!"

Ruth Raleigh, for this was the speaker's name, twisted her hands together in an excess of passionate distress. Leslie looked keenly at her, and saw that this daughter of the dales was a woman of no small beauty, and of great native stateliness, but that her face was worn hollow, as though by some haunting fear or unsatisfied longing, and she wondered to herself what her life's story had been.

"Your father spoke of the tragic death of his son. I had heard a whisper before. He thinks Marcus Drummond killed him—"

"I know. It is false. Marcus Drummond was far, far away. I will never believe that anyone killed him. Luke had grown wild. Oh, my God! do I not know that!"—a spasm of uncontrollable pain crossed her face—"but it was no doing of

Marcus Drummond's. Do not distrust him. Do not let his wife distrust him, whatever you may hear. Oh, it has made him enemies. My father is the bitterest of them. But I know—I know better; and he will not believe me. Luke had strained his heart as a young man, running and wrestling with his comrades. He had quarrelled—Oh, yes, there was proof of that. But I will not believe any hand struck a fatal blow. He was over-excited—he was habitually drinking too much. Perhaps he had lost heavily, and was desperate, too. Who knows? He is dead. He can never bear witness himself. Who is there to say? But Marcus Drummond was far away when this thing happened. That at least was proved, whatever mystery besides remains.”

She was as vehement to assert the innocence of Marcus as her father had been to accuse him. Leslie felt as though the enshrouding mystery were deepening rather than lightening. What were these wild dalesfolk to Marcus, or he to them, that his life should be so interlocked with theirs? Even as she asked the question, the woman had approached one step nearer.

“If you are the friend of Marcus Drummond, warn him—for he never comes here—I can get no word to him—that Ebenezer Raleigh is seeking to stir up strife at the pits. How he does it I cannot tell; but he seeks to use the men as his tool for vengeance. I know it—I know it! Bid Marcus Drummond have a care for himself. In old days



he never would; but now he has a wife to think of. Bid him be watchful. Bid him be careful; for the blow may be struck in an hour that he dreams not of!"

She turned and walked rapidly away; and Leslie, feeling as though she had heard and seen enough, turned her pony back along the way she had come, and retraced her steps, her face grave, her faculties absorbed—all her being merged in one mist of bewilderment, in which the prevailing thought was this:

"Dare I speak openly to Marcus? Could he read me the riddle, and would he if he could?"

## CHAPTER XV

### AT DALE FARM

LESLIE had meant to return by the way she came ; but her mind was so filled with conflicting thoughts and musings that she heeded not the path which she was taking, and though the pony picked his way cleverly enough over the rough ground, he practically chose his own way, and presently Leslie woke up to the knowledge that instead of descending the ridge, they were skirting along its shoulder in an easterly trend ; and though in a sense she was aware that this was the direction in which Falconer's Hall lay, for Wold Hall lay north and west of it, as she knew from the maps she had studied, still she was quite ignorant as to the right track to choose to get there quickly, and in fact there seemed little enough of a track to guide her now. The pony plodded on, however, as though quite content with himself and his rider, and Leslie, looking over the wild wide stretch of country before her, decided that she had better leave matters to the sagacity of her steed.

" If he doesn't know the way, he ought to do by this time ; and as I don't, I consider I have no call to interfere. And if the worst does come to

the worst, and we are lost, I think I would trust Marcus to find us before we succumb to hunger and cold. There is something about Marcus Drummond that makes you feel an absolute trust in him. I am sure that Marcia feels it too, and that it is the dominating factor in her life, whether she knows it or not. If she can only hold fast to her faith, whatever she hears, or fancies, or fears, things will come right yet. For my part, I think a dash of mystery is not without its charms."

It was not very long before Leslie noted that the character of the fell was changing somewhat. As she breasted the little ridges, she fancied the track grew more marked, and suddenly at the crest of one of these ridges she found herself looking upon a hollow, in which was set some smiling corn-land, some lush green meadows through which a stream meandered, and the buildings of a quaint farmhouse, veiled, for a wonder, with climbing roses, and not left bare and desolate as were the walls of Hill Top Farm and Wold Hall.

"This must surely be Dale Farm, of which Marcus spoke when he showed me his maps. Yes, and I think he said there were Dugdales living there. That is a good old name. I wonder if they would let me beg, borrow, or steal a glass of milk from them? I am horribly thirsty and rather tired, and I don't know what is my best way home either."

A pleasant enough homestead it was, set in its old-time garden and surrounding farm buildings ; but Leslie had little time to note all this, for a tall, grey-haired woman, with wide eyes that seemed full of terror, advanced to meet her—a woman who reminded her of the Ruth Raleigh she had left behind at Hill Top Farm, though this latter was browner of face and rounder of contour, and save for the look of fear and wonder in her eyes, was what would be termed a buxom and comfortable dame of the yeoman class, growing so sadly rare in these days.

Then the strange expression in her eyes changed. She came a few steps nearer to the rider, and made her a curtsy with a dignity that Leslie had not often seen exceeded amongst court reverences.

"I ask your pardon, ma'am," she said, speaking in a rich musical voice not unlike that of the other daleswoman—her niece, "but for a moment it was as though the dead had come to life. In part it was the sunshine behind you that gave the look ; now I see your face plainly, there is not so much likeness. Still, the look is there. She had those same starry eyes, and the soft frame of hair round her brows ; and she was graceful and slender, and she carried herself just so. I ask your pardon, ma'am, for speaking so free ; but you would wonder to see me coming towards you so, and seeming afraid at sight of you."

"Please do not apologise," spoke Leslie sweetly,

instantly interested. "I am afraid I recall sad memories for you."

"Nay, but the sight seems to do my old eyes good," answered the woman; "for it brings her back as she was in her girlhood—such a fairy-like creature. Ah me! ah me! And she lying in her grave right across the water—a grave that I shall never see, though she was like a daughter to me—poor lamb!"

Leslie thought she began to understand. Marcia had told her the story of the recluse of The Den, and the tragic episode in which he was mixed up.

Looking the woman earnestly in the face, she asked, with quick sympathy both in manner and expression:

"Am I then so like—Estelle Enderby?"

"You have heard of her?"

"Yes. I am staying in the neighbourhood—at Falconer's Hall. I am the friend of Mr. Drummond's wife. I have heard about Mr. Eastlake—and his sad story. I remember now that Estelle Enderby did live here. What a sweet place! I wonder how she ever made up her mind to leave it!"

"Ah me! ah me! I would she had not!" spoke Rebecca Dugdale, a strong, passionate expression of sorrow passing across her fine face. "I was against it from the first. But he was a man to take the eye of any maid. And he loved her—with the love of the whirlwind—if you can understand me. It seemed to sweep her fair off her feet. There are men who woo and win like that. But

it is not always the safest fashion. I misdoubted it from the first. You know the old saw, perhaps, ma'am? It may all be folly and nonsense, but it used to come into my head many a time in those days when he came courting our white ewe lamb :

“‘Change the name, and not the letter,  
You change for the worst and not the better.’

But she only laughed when I quoted it ; and maybe it is but nonsense, yet so it has been with her—woe the day !”

“I hope it is not always true,” spoke Leslie quickly ; and her thoughts flew to the Marcia Defresne who had married Marcus Drummond.

It seemed to her as though Rebecca of the farm had followed her train of thought, for the eyes of the two women met, and suddenly the elder one asked, with a curious inflexion in her voice :

“Is he making her happy?”

For answer, as it were, Leslie slipped from her saddle, and turning with her charming smile towards the mistress of the house, she said :

“I was coming to beg a drink of milk. I am so thirsty. I have lost my way across the fells. If I might rest here a little while, and talk to you—”

“You will be welcome as flowers in May,” spoke Rebecca, with her hand upon the bridle of the horse ; and raising her voice, she called to a lad to stable the creature, and give him a meal and water, whilst she led the way into the cool, quaint room or house-place of the farm.

There were latticed windows standing open to the sweet summer air, with deep, cushioned window-seats, upon one of which Leslie sank with a sigh of delight, pulling towards her a great spray of summer roses, and inhaling its sweetness as she exclaimed:

"Ah, what a perfectly sweet and charming place! And was this where Estelle Enderby lived? How could she ever make up her mind to leave?"

Rebecca sighed and yet smiled, as she brought a tumbler of milk, with a froth of cold bubbles at the top, across the room to her guest. Leslie sipped it luxuriously, looking around her whilst her hostess spoke in brief tender phrases of the girlish presence which Leslie's face and figure seemed to recall so strongly. It made a link between them from the first; for by nature Rebecca was a grave and reserved woman, and Leslie felt it, in spite of the confidences she was receiving. But then Leslie was endowed with a peculiar charm of manner, and she was accustomed to ask and to receive confidences that others would not dream of expecting at so early a stage. So presently she broke a brief silence by asking:

"What did you mean when you asked whether Mr. Drummond made his wife happy? Is there any reason why he should not?"

The woman looked at her with wide, questioning eyes, as though uncertain of her ground. Leslie went on, speaking very quietly:

"I have heard about the—the—tragedy at Wold

Hall. Ebenezer's son died there—or was killed. I know what the old man thinks and says. But it seems that Marcus Drummond was not there at the time—”

“It seems !—it seems !—it seems !” echoed Rebecca, with a note of strange misery in her tones. “Ah me ! so many things in those days seemed not to be. And yet they were—they were !”

“What do you mean ?” asked Leslie, with anxious eyes.

The woman stood gazing out at the window as one who sees nothing with outward vision, but is passing in review scenes that have graven themselves upon the memory in characters of fire.

“What do I mean ? Ah, if I could but answer that question ! Time was when I would not have doubted Marcus Drummond for all the world ! He grew up, as you may say, amongst us—the bonniest, the bravest boy ; with a way of his own, a will of his own that made him a little king amongst all the other lads—made him a power at the pits when the rest would be thinking of nothing but sport and play. On foot or on horseback, he was here, there, and everywhere, the friend of us all. A silent laddie, you will understand, ma'am, not to be plainly read at a glance. The very boys who were his comrades in sports owned his sway as their master, though he never claimed mastery for himself. As he grew older, his silent ways grew upon him ; but that was only natural. It was the nature within him. We watched him grow to manhood. We were proud of him. We



delighted in him. Then came that time when he was left alone at Wold Hall, of his own wish and by his own will. That was the beginning of the change."

Leslie spoke not a word when Rebecca paused. She held her curiosity in check. Let the woman tell her story her own way. She might learn most from that.

"It was not always even then," suddenly broke out Rebecca. "It did not begin at once; but when it came, it came sudden! That was the way all through—came sudden, and went sudden. And the mystery of it, too! He never seemed to change his daylight ways. Regular at the pits, with his masterful eye upon everything. Not a quiver or a tremble of the hand; his eye clear, his voice like a trumpet, his hand and nerve as steady as cold iron. But at night—ah me! I have seen the lights gleaming out from Wold Hall up till the very hour of dawn. My boys were drawn in times and again! I have seen Marcus Drummond let them out into the cold chill air of the morning—a wild figure with wild eyes, and a laugh that turned you to stone to hear. And yet a few hours later there he would be at his post by the shafts, a little stern, perhaps—all that ever was noted there was that extra sternness of look and manner. Yet at night it would be the same thing over again; or he would be raging across the fell on horseback, as though the devil himself were driving him. Sometimes he has stopped at dark at this very door, called out to me for something to drink, and bent from his saddle to kiss my hand as I gave it him.

And the glitter in his eye! It has gone through and through me."

"And that is why you asked me if he made his wife happy?"

"Aye; for it has been my hope and prayer ever since I heard of it, that marriage would be his salvation; that if he loved a good woman, she would drive the devil out of him. For he has power over women's hearts. I know it, alas! but too well. My niece Ruth will hear no word against him. From childhood they were friends. She believes in him yet. And would that I could do the same! But the testimony of one's own eyes—who can doubt it? And we have sent our two boys away—though we miss them so sorely, and the farm needs them badly. But after poor Luke Raleigh's tragic death, we could no longer run risks."

"What did they do at Wold Hall?" asked Leslie, with bated breath. "Game?—drink?—what?"

"Aye, so I believe, game and dice and drink—turn night into day. Is not that enough? And what will that lead to sometimes? What befel that night none will ever know now. Marcus Drummond's alibi was such as brought him through without a shadow of a doubt as to where he had been that night. The whole staff of Falconer's Hall testified that he was there. But—but—ah me, I know not what to think! I know what others saw, though they were held to have been deceived by darkness

or by drink. Yet at least this much has resulted from that night's work : never since have the lights of Wold Hall been seen shining through the hours of the night."

But Rebecca could say no more. Suddenly a child's shriek of joy broke in upon them. There was a little scutter across the red-tiled floor of flying fairy footsteps, and with a cry of "Muvver, muvver, my darling muvver!" a white-robed, childish creature, with a face of ecstatic joy, flung itself upon Leslie in a perfect rapture of happiness.

Leslie, sitting in her white riding-dress, with the golden light from the south-west behind her, did indeed bear a strange resemblance in colouring and contour to that Estelle Enderby who had once lived at the old farm. The resemblance awoke within the heart of the child a host of half-forgotten memories ; and Leslie, as she gathered the little one into her arms, raised appealing eyes to Rebecca's face, and then across her shoulder encountered the startled gaze of a pair of hollow dark eyes, set in a face that arrested her instant attention ; for it seemed to her at that moment as though it were a face familiar to her in dreams or waking visions, although she knew that she had never looked at Percival Eastlake in the flesh before.

She knew him instantly—knew him from Marcia's description—knew him, because he had entered with the white-robed child at his side. She rose from her seat with Sweetheart clinging to her still, and asked of him, with a note of tender compassion in her tones :

"What can I say? You must try and tell her yourself."

Percival approached, and detached the little clinging arms from Leslie's neck, holding the child in his own arms with a tenderness that was very noticeable to the girl so close beside him.

"It is not mother, Sweetheart," he said gently, "but a pretty lady who looks like her, and who will perhaps let you love her if you ask her."

Leslie's gracious charm robbed the situation of all awkwardness. As the child's big, wondering eyes met hers again, she held out her arms and lifted her upon her knee, subsiding again into her cushioned seat as she exclaimed:

"Yes, love me, darling, for being like *muvver*, and I will love you too. I have no little *girlie* belonging to me—no little sister or niece or anyone to cuddle and love. You shall be my little sweetheart, and we will love one another ever so much."

The child nestled contentedly to her, tilting back her head, and gazing up into her face.

"You remind me so of *muvver*," she said. "I fought it was *muvver* come back at first. I would like to love you, and for you to love me. And I would like for you to love *Best Beloved* too."

## CHAPTER XVI

### HOSPITALITY AT FALCONER'S HALL

"My dear Marcia, you are a most fortunate woman. You have got a husband not one bit like any other woman's—a man with a delightful halo of mystery about him. Do not let us strip his mystery from off him. I always did resent that I was born after magicians and genii were extinct. Really, Marcus does not make a bad substitute for them in these degenerate days!"

Marcia's grave face slightly relaxed.

"You always talk a great deal of nonsense, you know, Leslie."

"My nonsense is far more wise than most people's sense!" replied Leslie audaciously. "But I have said it, and I stick to it. Whatever this mystery was, it is a thing of two years past. It has been probably exaggerated out of all knowledge by whispers and awed speculation. If Marcus did have a fling at Wold Hall when he was left alone there—well, I rather wonder what man of strong character would not have done the same. Some tragedy certainly did happen; but this was evidently some accident—or crime—in which Marcus was not

directly concerned. It taught him his lesson, however. It put a stop to the bouts of which we hear whispers. I think it is not many modern wealthy husbands of nine-and-twenty who could bring a better record when all is said and done. And to give you leave to ask what you will—that is quite unique. Most men would not admit that there was anything to ask.”

Marcia held her head a little proudly.

“I cannot quite see it as you do, Leslie. If there is anything to tell, he should tell it. He should not lay the onus of asking upon me. I hate to ask questions!”

“My dearest, you are so young—so crude! You do not half appreciate your privileges in the matter of husbands! Marcus is so much more developed. There is an aroma of aloofness and mystery about him and his doings. He provokes curiosity without instantly satisfying it. It may be that he knows it better to keep his secret, yet he offers to share it sooner than that you should make yourself unhappy. This implies that there are wheels within wheels. When is it ever otherwise in this complex world of ours? I do not know what more you would have; and in your place, I should lie low—and trust him!”

A queer light sprang into Marcia's eyes. That was exactly what she was doing—only she would not have confessed as much even to Leslie. She did desire that Marcus should of his own initiative tell her all; but failing that, she had well-nigh reached the conclusion that her trust in him was strong

enough to bridge the gulf. To question him might suggest the idea of distrust, and her pride as well as her growing loyalty to the man she had married revolted from the thought of asking a confidence which he withheld by choice.

"Percival Eastlake trusts him," spoke Leslie, with an odd little gleam in her eyes. "He betrayed that much a hundred times even in our short conversation. He likes you too, Marcia. He spoke of you several times. Sweetheart calls you her Beautiful Lady. Why should he shut himself up with the child? We must persuade him to show himself at the garden party next week. I did speak of it, and he shook his head. But Sweetheart is all on fire to come. I said she should have an invitation all to herself. Can we not go and capture them by force—you and I together?"

She appealed to Marcus at dinner the same night. She detailed her adventures, observing a certain reticence with regard to the nature of the conversations held, but speaking freely of having wandered over the fells and lost herself, and of having seen both Hill Top and Dale Farms, and some of their inhabitants.

Marcus listened in his habitual silence, throwing in a word of comment or question now and again, but not betraying any undue interest in the tale. When she mentioned Hill Top Farm, he threw one quick glance at Marcia, and said:

"You did not warn Miss Moncrieff about that place?"

"Oh, Marcia told me there was a fierce old man there; but that was part of the attraction. I just love everything that is out of the common. I saw him too—he might have walked off the stage! You live in the most charming country, Mr. Drummond, with surprises at every turn. I saw your friend, Mr. Eastlake, too. Marcia did not half tell me how fascinating he was! He must not be allowed to coop himself up in that delightful bungalow house of his. Oh, yes, I saw it. They took me on my road as far as our ways went together, and Sweetheart would have me come in just to look. It is like a house in a dream; but I think men ought not to live in dreams. I told him so. Marcia must rout him out. We must have him across at the garden party next week. Mr. Drummond, you are to decree it; because I have the feeling that whatever you decree comes to pass!" And she looked at him with laughter in her eyes, but with a good deal of earnest meaning underlying her banter.

"The laws of the Medes and Persians which alter not!" he remarked. "I don't know how that worked in the long run; but I will certainly write the decree, and sign it with the royal signet, if you will undertake to act as officer, and see my will carried out."

"I will do that—or Marcia," answered Leslie, with shining eyes. "Sweetheart has set her heart upon coming, and I have a vow in heaven that she shall not be disappointed."

And so it came about that upon the next day Marcia and Leslie rode boldly through the gates of



The Den, to be hailed by the excited child with shouts of welcome—shouts which brought Percival Eastlake out of the house with his slow, soft footfalls, that quickened perceptibly as he saw the cause of the child's delight.

Marcia explained her errand with a gentle courtliness that was not cold, although her words were few.

"My husband has sent me on an errand, and I come to add my request to his. He tells me you have never visited Falconer's Hall. We think that is a matter which should be set right. Next week, as you know, we hope to see our friends at an *al fresco fête*. Several children and all the young life of the place will be there. We want this child to take her share—and you also. We think the fatigue to you and the excitement to her would be less if you would consent to be our guest for a few days, including that of the *fête*. I have come to ask you."

Sweetheart, who had claimed Leslie with an insistence that still bespoke her recognition of a special tie between them, clapped her hands, and her eyes shone like stars.

'Oh, Best Beloved! you will let us go? Oh, Pretty Mamma, tell Best Beloved that he is to come! He will do anything that you say—I know he will!'"

Leslie stood up, her charming face aglow with smiles. She was not confused by the child's persistent belief that she was in some way connected with that far-away life which was like a fairy dream to her now. She understood the reason for this. It

had seemed to make a certain link between her and the recluse from the moment when she had seen his grave, startled gaze fixed upon her as he crossed the red-tiled floor of Rebecca Dugdale's kitchen. Afterwards they had all talked of Estelle Enderby and her girlhood there. Walking beside her pony towards The Den, Percival had afterwards spoken a little of his brother and of the tragedy that had shadowed his own life.

"I should like you to come," she said very sweetly, looking full into Percival's eyes. "You are Marcus's friend, and you should be there; also it will make Sweetheart very happy."

"I will come," spoke Percival, with a readiness which surprised Marcia, after all she had heard of him; "and I thank you for your kindness in desiring it."

They did not linger long, their errand being accomplished; but they knew that there would be no drawing back now. Their guest would not fail them.

He came upon the appointed day, bringing Sweetheart with him. Leslie seemed to take possession of the child as by natural right. As was the way of the little one, she had already found a name for her new friend, and it was useless to combat her choice. As Marcia was her "Beautiful Lady," so Leslie was her "Pretty Mamma." After one ineffectual attempt to get her to take to "Bonnie Leslie" as a substitute, the girl gave way.

"What does it matter?" she said, laughing. "I am like her mother, and that is reason enough. You cannot change Sweetheart's views about men or things. I have discovered that already!"

When Marcus Drummond did a thing, he did it thoroughly and well. Witness to this fact was abundantly borne by the arrangements for the *fête* at Falconer's Hall that brilliant August afternoon. Marcia knew how little share she had had in the matter. Her husband had talked things over with her at the outset; but the trouble had been his from first to last, and she knew that the credit which was accorded to her was really his due. There was no ostentation, but there was a certain dignified magnificence which made itself felt, and there was originality in a good many of the ideas for the amusement and entertainment of the guests.

Marcia had little to do but to receive the company, which she did with a stately grace that commended itself to onlookers as suiting her rather statuesque style of beauty. Marcus stood beside her for a while, tall, stalwart—a rather splendid specimen of manhood; his manner cool and courteous, and perhaps a little enigmatic; but then he was something of an enigma to his own neighbourhood, and perhaps he was aware of this, and did not trouble to explain himself.

Leslie was one of those spectators who see most of the game. She had undertaken to superintend the children's revels, and not as yet being known

to Marcia's new world, found ample leisure for this congenial task. Sweetheart, too, was a stranger to the children of the place; but she was very soon queening it over them with the unconscious airs of a child of the house; and Leslie had time and opportunity for observing other things.

She saw that Percival Eastlake's appearance here excited surprise, and that former friends were welcoming him back to their midst with a certain *empressement*.

Late on in the afternoon, when the company was beginning to disperse, and Sweetheart had run off indoors to find Percival, according to Leslie's directions, she (a little weary) betook herself to a sheltered nook, and only when settled there noted that two ladies were talking together just on the other side of the glowing mass of flowers which shut her in. She did not trouble her head on that account, or note what they said till the name of Percival Eastlake struck her ear, and she found herself hearing what passed. Then suddenly one spoke, and said:

"Oh, yes, that is all very well; but why this hermit's life since his return? His brother's sad death over yonder and his own health explain something; but I have always thought there must be more behind. And what is his connection with Marcus Drummond?"

"Well, my dear, if you ask me my own opinion, I fancy that there is a very strong bond between these two men, which has never been quite explained, and which might account for a good deal."

## The Secret of Wold Hall

"Oh, do tell me! Do you mean—do you think? I mean, had Percival Eastlake anything to do with—that thing which happened at Wold Hall—is it two years ago now?"

"Two and a half. It was in February, if I remember right! Well, the facts are just these: A man was found dead—possibly murdered; but that was left an open question, as the medical testimony showed his heart to have been in a diseased state before. Marcus Drummond was proved to have had no connection with the matter, he being ten miles distant when it occurred. But it raised comment and scandal, and he went abroad for a short time by his parents' wish, till the talk blew over. Almost immediately after he left, Percival Eastlake also left for the West Indies. Before very long, just when Marcus had returned, he went after him and brought him back—a wreck. Since then—close upon two years now—Percival has kept himself shut up like a recluse, for no reason I can learn save that his brother showed jealousy of his appearance at a dying woman's request, attacked him when mad with sorrow and drink, and met his own death almost immediately afterwards. A sad story, of course; but not one to account for Percival's obstinate retirement. I knew him and his brother as children, as I knew Marcus Drummond. Their parents were my friends. He need not have shut himself away from all his old friends, unless, indeed—"

"Oh, do go on! I am so interested. Tell me what you think."

"It is scarcely a theory; but I have always fancied that Marcus knew all about the tragedy at Wold Hall, and has been in measure screening somebody."

"Not Percival Eastlake, surely!"

"I do not know. I sometimes wonder. They were such great friends always. And you know, my dear, there were certainly two of them at that time—I mean, that since Marcus could not be in two places at once, somebody must have been taken for him more often than it would be easy to guess."

"But they are not alike!"

"Not exactly; and yet before Percival grew so thin and haggard, he was almost exactly the same height and build as Marcus, with the same broad shoulders, as you can see now. Both were brown-haired men, with bright eyes; and mark this—it was always believed that only Marcus Drummond could ride a certain fiery black horse, that had gone near to kill more than one hardy groom who had attempted the task. Anyone seen careering over the fells upon that mad creature was declared to be Marcus Drummond. But I know that Percival could ride the beast also. I have seen him with my own eyes. Therefore—"

"But you don't think—I mean that night! You don't mean you think—"

"I mean just what I say, and no more. Those two young men were fast friends. They had no secrets from each other. They were always at each

other's houses. Roland was always wild—the elder brother. Percival was thought not to be, but who knows? He has had the wildness knocked out of him now, by his looks, poor lad ; but how it was in former days—”

The speakers moved off, leaving Leslie sitting alone, with a very white face and tightly clasped hands.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE UNEXPECTED

To her surprise, Leslie felt herself unable to sleep that night. This was so unusual with her that she cast about in her mind for the cause, and decided that perhaps it was the child's presence at her side; for Sweetheart had been wakeful after the excitements of the day, and rousing up when Leslie came to bed, had slipped out of her little white cot in the dressing-room, and had pattered in on bare rosy feet, entreating to be permitted to lie beside her Pretty Mamma, which concession being granted, she had speedily settled to the sound, dreamless slumber of healthy childhood.

But Leslie lay wide-eyed and wakeful, her mind at work in a fashion she could not understand, and which made her ask impatiently of herself at last:

"What does it matter to me? What concern is it of mine? If there be some secret these two men are hiding between themselves, what earthly business is it of mine? If Marcia can be content to remain in ignorance, when a question from her would explain all, what need is there for me to worry my head over it?"



And then it suddenly came over Leslie that perhaps Marcia did not ask because she did not want to know. Perhaps she judged it better that the secret—the mystery—whatever it was—had better lie undisturbed. There is some sound sense in the proverb which says: "Let sleeping dogs lie." Leslie was well aware of that; and yet, as she presently slipped out of bed, and stood gazing out into the breathless moonlit night, she found herself speaking again half aloud:

"Yes, if others would—that would be best. But will they?—will they? It was all very well so long as Marcus kept himself quiet, engrossed in his pits, and Percival shut himself up at The Den. Out of sight is out of mind. But Marcus has married. He is coming forward as a man of the county, and curiosity is already beginning to awake to life. Do I care because Percival's name was brought in? What is Mr. Eastlake to me? Why do I call him Percival in my thoughts? Oh, of course, that is a way I have. It belongs to our modern world. Marcus is Marcus to me, though I never call him so to his face. A man with the face of a Sir Percival or Sir Galahad cannot escape the consequences. Is it possible that he was mixed up in a discreditable brawl—that he is letting vague suspicion rest on Marcus for his sins? Oh, I cannot believe it! It is impossible!

"Oh, you shameless little horror!" she exclaimed, apostrophising her pale image in the long glass, as she swept round in a whirlwind of dismay and amaze,

the truth slowly forcing itself upon her. She stood in the moonlit room, a white, slim figure, draped in billowy falls of lace and silken sheen, her dark hair tumbled in waving shadow far below her waist, her eyes shining with the glow of stars. "You disgraceful little abomination! You who have always boasted to yourself that you would never demean yourself by caring for a man, unless he had proved himself to be a sort of King Arthur and St. Francis and Sir Philip Sydney, and any other paragon you like to mention, all rolled into one—and then not until he had served twice seven years as your loyal and devoted slave—you to go and begin to feel sentimental over a boy with a pretty face, who has never spoken a hundred words to you, or thought of you save as a passing acquaintance! I wouldn't have believed it of you—no, that I wouldn't! And the sooner you put all such nonsense out of your silly little addle-pate, the better it will be for you!"

And Leslie, with a vehement gesture of warning to her own image in the glass, threw off her foam-like wrapper, got resolutely into bed, and taking the sleeping child in her arms, set herself to forget the events of the day, and to lose herself in the land of dreams.

Next day all traces of the *fête* had been removed as though by magic, and the peace of a late summer-tide brooded over Falconer's Hall. Percival and Sweetheart were still staying on for another day; but Percival did not appear at breakfast, and Leslie was relieved by his absence, she scarcely knew why.

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He came out later into the garden, where she was playing with the child, whilst Marcia sat beneath a spreading cedar tree with a book. Marcus had ridden across to the pits; but expected to be back during the course of the afternoon. Leslie felt a wave of burning colour rise in her cheek at Percival's approach, and envied Marcia's gentle self-possession as she made him welcome, and saw him comfortably settled on the lounging chair which had been set in readiness for him. The child rushed up with her garland of flowers from Leslie's skilful hands, and placed it on his head, with shouts of triumphant glee, crying out to Leslie meantime:

"Oh, Pretty Mamma, Pretty Mamma, look at Best Beloved! See what a lovely wreath you have made him!"

Percival removed the flowers, and set them upon Sweetheart's waving locks, giving one quick, fleeting look at Leslie as he answered:

"Take care, little one; flowers—Titania's flowers—on the wrong head are apt to make an ass of a man."

Leslie was her most sparkling and audacious self to-day. Marcia had thought up till now that she was softer and gentler in her manner than in the days of the past. But to-day all the old brilliance had returned. Leslie provoked in Percival an animation which Marcia had not guessed him to possess. The languor of illness and suffering had hidden this characteristic before. It began to sparkle out now. He related many anecdotes with a spirit of which they had seen no trace hitherto;

and as he did so, Leslie's face grew unaccountably grave, for it seemed to her that there was truth in the remark she had heard overnight, that Percival Eastlake had not been in his youth as he was now, when the hand of Death had been so near to grasping him for a prey.

But could he ever have been mistaken for Marcus? She could not forget the tragedy enacted at Wold Hall that February night. That was at least no mare's nest. Percival's name had never been brought into that affair so far as she knew. Yet had it been, could he have proved an alibi as easily as Marcus had done?

An overmastering desire to know the truth possessed Leslie. It was late on in the afternoon when she found herself alone with Percival. Marcia had left them to see a caller within doors. The child, wearied out with her play, was asleep in a swinging hammock near at hand—within earshot, to be sure, but far away in the land of dreams. Leslie had never been one to whom it came easily to repress her impulses. She had an undefined feeling that these as a rule guided her best. Her face had grown suddenly grave—almost severe. Looking full into Percival's face, she asked:

"Was Marcus Drummond at Wold Hall that February night when Luke Raleigh met his death there?"

Percival's gaze sought hers with a curious gleam, as though he would have read her very soul. But his answer was quiet and firm :

"No, he was not."

"You know that of your own knowledge?"

"I do."

"Who was there, then?"

He looked at her very steadily.

"You must ask Marcus Drummond that question—not me."

"But you know!"

The words leaped out almost without her own volition; and he met them by silence. He made no reply. A curious leaden weight seemed to settle upon her heart. She put the next question with almost cutting keenness of tone.

"Do you think it is right that one man should suffer suspicion and doubt to shield another?"

The reply was somewhat long in coming, but it was firmly given.

"I think in some cases it may be justifiable."

"Justifiable for the other man to suffer it?" flashed out Leslie.

Again, after a rather long pause, he said:

"Sometimes it seems the best and simplest plan—perhaps the only one to avoid worse complications."

"I hate expediency! It is the ruin of honour!" quoth Leslie hotly, and stood up with a curious fire in her eyes, a curious tense rigidity in her aspect.

Percival was watching her intently, with a gravely questioning and considering look. There was a certain shadow of perplexity in his eyes; but no shame, and no fear or apprehension. Then as he

watched her, he saw her face change. A vivid light as of pleasure and surprise sprang into her eyes, blotting out the look which had burned in them before. She made a forward step, her hands outstretched, and her lips forming a glad word of greeting.

"Ennisvale!" she cried.

Then he turned his head to see, and there was Marcia returning to them in company with a youth of singularly attractive and winning aspect. His face was for the moment turned towards her, and it was bright with an affection that was good to see. But at Leslie's exclamation he started forward, and then a new and more eager and ardent expression betrayed a change of feeling, and as the two met, it was with both hands outstretched, in an intimacy of word and greeting which seemed to the onlooker to indicate a good deal.

"You bad boy—if you were coming—not to have come a day or two earlier, to see Marcia in her glory!"

"That is what I was aiming for when I got your letter describing what was going on. But you never told me quite what fearful hills and roads you had round you. I set out on my motor, thinking to do the distance easily in the time. But alas for the mutability of human affairs—especially where automobiles are concerned—I found myself in a network of hills, miles away from everywhere, and, of course, the beastly thing went and busted itself somewhere! I had my man with me; but he could

only patch it up as far as the next town, and there we were kept two blessed days—”

“And you were afraid to leave the precious snorting infant to the tender mercies of its nurse, without its own daddy to take care of it! Oh, yes, I quite understand. You need not make excuses. The new toy must take precedence of all else—sister, lover, friend, *fête*—”

They were walking along together as she spoke, and the rest of the banter was lost. Leslie had used the word lover purely as a figure of speech. She and Ennisvale were such excellent friends and comrades that she spoke out to him without troubling to pick her words. But it struck like a jarring note on Percival Eastlake's ears. He felt a curious pain at heart, and then sharply took himself to task.

Marcia's voice broke in upon his reverie :

“It is my brother, just arrived unexpectedly. I wanted to introduce you, but Leslie has monopolised him. He did not see you for the sun in his eyes. But they will soon come back from their stroll. They always have a good deal to say to one another.”

“Of course,” spoke Percival quietly; and Marcia did not note any ring of pain in his voice, although he checked himself suddenly, not feeling it under full control.

“I think he would have been here before but for his new toy,” went on Marcia smilingly; for she was beginning to realise the difference which

her marriage was making already in her brother's life.

An automobile a few months ago would have been as impossible an acquisition as the moon in the sky. She was just a little surprised that he had been able to afford one as it was. She meant to read him a little sisterly disquisition on the dangers of over-lavish expenditure, even though matters were made easy for them now that she was her father's creditor, and asked of him no payment of the mortgage money. Still, he ought not to run into extravagance, though it was hard to grudge him his little fling.

When the pair returned, Sweetheart was walking between them, holding a hand of each.

She disengaged herself, and ran forward, throwing her arms about Percival's neck.

"Best Beloved," she cried, "here is my Knight, and he is going to carry me away on his iron horse. But I tell him you cannot spare me yet. I fink he had better go and kill some more dragons first, and then perhaps I'll be ready for him—not before."

Percival rose to his feet and shook hands with Ennisvale, who was laughing, and looked like a man in whose world the sun shines with perpetual radiance. Notwithstanding the undefined pain at Percival's heart, he could not but be drawn towards the bright-faced lad, whom it was hard to believe was a year older than his stately sister. He looked so boyish, and yet possessed something of the confidence and self-possession of a man.

"Your little niece has adopted me as a friend at



sight," he said. "I hope you will do the same. I want to know all my sister's neighbours and friends, and I hear that you rank as one of the most important of these."

"Lady Marcia does me too much honour," spoke Percival quietly; "yet I may lay claim to being one of Marcus Drummond's oldest friends."

An odd gleam flashed into Leslie's eyes. She was standing a little apart, and she breathed one word softly to herself through shut teeth with a curious inflection.

"Friend!" was what she exclaimed, with a fierce ring of scorn in her tones.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE ASKING OF QUESTIONS

"Change the name, and not the letter,  
You change for the worse and not the better."

LESLIE, leaning over the balustrade of the terrace in the summer moonlight, had unconsciously uttered these words half aloud, and was startled to hear a voice almost at her side speak out of the darkness of the yew tree which terminated the terrace at this end.

"What is that, Miss Moncrieff?"

The voice was the voice of Marcus Drummond, who advanced slowly into the clearer light.

"Oh, just an old saw which I heard one day *à propos* of the marriage of poor Estelle Enderby. You see, I am a little interested in her, because so many people think me like what she was at the same age; though you never said anything about it."

"I don't think the likeness ever struck me; though I can see it when it is pointed out. I had a vague feeling that you reminded me of somebody; but it went no further. So it is not wise to change the name and not the letter, is it? Have you another parallel in your mind, Miss Moncrieff?"

His rather intense gaze was fixed upon her face. There was always something a little imperious about this man which gave Leslie a delicious sense of his strength and power. To her, strength was a distinctly attractive attribute. She felt that it drew her like a magnet. It was the strength she thought she saw in Percival Eastlake's face—that, together with the story of his shadowed life—which had formed his strongest attraction for her. The revolt she had felt when she believed that he might be sheltering himself behind another had its origin in her inherent contempt for weakness. Now looking up into the strong face slightly bent towards her, she recognised the dominating power which this man was exercising alike upon his own wife and upon her, who was simply an onlooker, and she answered his question by another:

“Do you think you are treating Marcia well yourself?”

No man would have dared to put such a question to Marcus. Leslie was aghast at her own temerity. But having once made the plunge, she was not going to draw back or show fear.

“Will you explain yourself?” he asked quietly.

“If you wish,” she answered, her colour coming and going in her excitement. “I have wanted to speak to you before this; but you are not an easy man to warn. Do you know that you may be in danger, if this sort of thing goes on? And do you think it is fair to Marcia to endanger yourself—for a scruple of—honour?”

His eyes seemed to burn her; but not a muscle

of his face changed. He leaned back against the balustrade, and spoke quietly :

"You can scarcely be said to have explained yourself yet."

"I think you might understand without further explanation."

"There you are mistaken. I must understand more. To what danger do you allude? And who has alarmed you by the rumour?"

"I did not say I was alarmed ; and if you wish to know, it was the woman Ruth Raleigh who warned me. And though she was not explicit, I am pretty certain that it was her father's animosity she feared."

"Ah !" spoke Marcus quietly, "but that is an old story now."

"Old rancour, old grudges, old wounds may break out with added intensity of hurt," spoke Leslie, "and new weapons may be used. Why do you continue to shield the man who killed old Ebenezer's son?"

She was panting now in her excitement. As he spoke not a word, she suddenly broke out more vehemently :

"You know he does not believe your alibi. He is your bitter enemy. He may be stirring up more evil and strife than you know of."

"I think not. I am very well aware of Ebenezer Raleigh's plans and projects. He may cause me trouble. He will not take me by surprise. Nevertheless, I thank you for your warning. I thank

Ruth Raleigh for her confidence. But then—she knows.”

“Knows what?” breathlessly.

“What happened that night at Wold Hall.”

“Knows that you were not there?”

“That was proved to all the world.”

“Knows who was there, you mean?”

‘Certainly. She was there herself.”

“Then why does she not speak out and tell all she knows?”

He looked at her with the shadow of a smile in his eyes.

“Had you not better ask her that question yourself?”

“You tell me!” cried Leslie, with sudden passion. “There is some mystery, and I want to know—oh, how I want to know! Tell me—will you not tell me what it all means?”

“I will tell Marcia—when she asks,” spoke Marcus very quietly. “She has the right to know—if she wishes. Perhaps she may be too wise to wish. That is for her to decide. You will understand, Miss Moncrieff, that until I have spoken of this with my wife, I can speak of it with no other person.”

She liked him the better for these words. She knew that he was right in so viewing the matter. But her fevered curiosity was not one whit allayed, rather intensified by his manner. She knew she should learn nothing more from him; to try and do so would be to emulate the angry waves dashing against some towering rock. Nevertheless, she

spoke once more, though without asking any further question.

"If you expose yourself to needless peril, through whatever scruple it be, you will be doing Marcia a wrong. Your life, your safety, does not belong alone to yourself. She has her share in it now. You must protect her property in it, if you are careless of your own."

His glance was bent upon her face with the same intensity of gaze that she had noted before. She seemed to feel it, as one is conscious of the hot breath of a forest fire sometimes, before it can either be seen or smelt.

"You think Marcia—would care?" he asked, speaking the words slowly, one by one.

Leslie threw back her head; there was something of challenge in her eyes.

"You had better ask her that question yourself," she said.

Then she left him standing there alone in the moonlight, a towering figure, like an image of bronze, and she passed into the circle of light which fell from the open windows of the room she had left, where Marcia was sitting with Ennisvale beside her, talking in that intimate and unfettered fashion which had been their prerogative from childhood. Ennisvale had never kept back secrets from his sister, and he seemed to have no disposition to do so now. Hitherto the presence of Percival Eastlake and the flitting fairy child had rather militated against confidential talk; but they

had been enjoying one together during the past half hour or more, and Marcia looked more satisfied and content than Leslie had seen her as yet in her new home. For a moment the shadow seemed to have vanished from her eyes, and the statuesque beauty of her face had warmed into a more glowing life.

Ennisvale sauntered out to find Marcus; and Marcia, looking after him with a smile, spoke to Leslie with a curious shining in her eyes.

"Has he told you too? I had no idea of it. His new automobile was a present from Marcus. I am glad in one way; for I do not think Ennisvale ought to have been to that expense; he is quite aware of that himself. I am relieved to find that he is fully alive to the dangers of extravagance. I think he has learned his lesson. But Marcus told him that he is interested in these motor-cars; that he wants the matter thoroughly tested by an independent person, not interested in the industry. This is not the country in which to make such experiments, and he has not the time himself; so he has made Ennisvale his deputy. He bears the cost, and Ennisvale does the running, learns the mechanism, and occupies himself in a healthy manner out of doors and in workshops (for Ennisvale is thoroughly practical and a real enthusiast), instead of idling away his time in clubs, or devoting his energy to polo or cards, or anything extravagant like that. Marcus is treating Ennisvale as though he were his own younger brother. That is what he said himself."

"That is nice of him," spoke Leslie, half smiling at the adjective, which seemed so singularly feeble as applied to Marcus Drummond. "Marcia, I am for ever telling you that you have been a lucky woman. I sometimes wonder whether you realise yourself your own good luck."

Marcia answered not. Time was when she would have responded by some remark, half scornful, half mocking; but that time had gone by. Marcus was no longer to her a pawn in the game—a lay figure in a bargain in which no human or elemental passions were to intermingle. He was beginning to play a part in her life which she had never reckoned upon at the beginning. A new element seemed to have entered into the game with the arrival of Ennisvale. A link of intimacy had been established between those two. But it was not of this that Marcia was thinking just now, as she sat with her shining glance upon Leslie's face.

"Ennisvale has been telling me something else," she said.

Leslie laughed, moved towards the piano, and began to sing a little gay song with a lilt in it that seemed to bespeak light-heartedness and joy. Marcia let her get to the end of the first verse, and then came and stood behind her, with her hands upon her shoulder.

"Is it so, Leslie?" she asked.

Leslie sprang up and whirled round; her face was glowing, yet defiant; her slight figure seemed to increase in height and dignity.



"What are you asking, Marcia?"

"Not for any confidence you do not wish to give me, Leslie; but you knew all about my—betrothal, so why should I not know something of yours, when it may mean so much to me?"

"You are premature, my dearest Marcia."

"Yet perhaps not so very much! Ennisvale thinks that it is coming. It has always been our mother's wish—and mine. Leslie, is it true? Are we to be sisters?"

Leslie's silvery laugh rang out; she began to dance lightly round the room, as though to keep her face away from the earnest gaze of Marcia, who felt there was something in this mood which she did not completely understand.

"Ah, but do not let us take life too seriously, whatever we do!" cried Leslie, with something a little mocking in her mirth; "it is such a mistake. It is so much pleasanter to be a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower. That is Ennisvale's chiefest virtue; he does not take existence sadly. That is why we suit one another so well. Could anything be better and more fitting? Your mother wants it; your father is content. I have a nice little fortune, and he can make Ennisvale a sufficient allowance now, and the estate is no longer burdened. We like each other—we suit each other. I have always been fond of Ennisvale; and now he begins to play at being in love, and he does it with a charming grace, and almost persuades himself that it is the real thing! What could you wish for more?"

But Marcia's face was grave. Notwithstanding the fact that she herself had walked with open eyes into what she termed "loveless matrimony," there was to her a jarring note in Leslie's mirth. And yet, surely she did care for Ennisvale! Marcia had noted the warmth of her welcome when her brother appeared. More than this, she had been certain that Percival Eastlake had noted it too, and even little Sweetheart had asked her in a whisper whether the new-comer were not the "true knight" of her "Pretty Mamma." The child was always weaving fancies about the grown-up people with whom she was thrown, it being as natural to her as ordinary games to other children. Therefore Marcia had been herself on the watch for that which she would welcome cordially; but Leslie's manner was not quite satisfactory.

The girl threw herself into a chair at last, and flung her arms back above her head in a pretty attitude to which she was prone when alone with her intimate friends.

"Oh, Marcia, it is all so proper, so fitting, so exactly the right thing! That is the Nemesis of being such a good little girl! I shall end by making the most appropriate marriage with the dearest of dear boys! I shall be a gay young viscountess first, and in due course of nature a full-blown countess! Could anything be more exactly the right thing? Tell me, is it sublime, or is it ridiculous, for really I do not know?"

"Why should it be either, Leslie?" asked Marcia, her delicate brows drawn together.

"Ah, don't begin asking riddles! I never could answer them. I have a feeling about things. I can see so exactly what it will be. We should have a charming life together. He has the sunniest temper in the world, and I am not hard to live with. We are both nice-looking; we should have the sweetest children! Everybody would like us, and most people would envy us. But oh, Marcia, it would be like a little idyllic scene on the stage. I should feel as though I were strutting before the footlights for people to clap their hands and say, 'How charming!' 'How sweet!' Private theatricals are delightful in their way. But one doesn't want to live in a charade—in the last act of it, where everything comes right, and everybody does the right thing! Can't you understand?"

"I am not sure that I can. Surely a happy marriage is the best thing life has to offer—at least, so we are brought up to believe."

"Happy!—ah, but how to define happiness; that is the crux of the whole matter. There are so many kinds of happiness. Some people are content with those blessings I have just enumerated, and ask for no more. But somehow—somehow—I don't think that would be enough for me. I don't think it would be enough for you, Marcia."

"Don't bring me in, Leslie," spoke Marcia quickly; "I am no criterion for anyone else."

"You married a Man," spoke Leslie, with sudden

vehemence—"a man with a mystery surrounding him—if you like. What should I care for that, if I were assured that he was a Man through it all!"

Leslie paused. Her eyes were fixed. There was a very strange look upon her fair face. Marcia regarded her steadfastly.

"Ennisvale is young," she said; "he has not been tried. He is not cast in the iron mould of the Drummonds; yet I think in matters of honour and of loyalty he would not fail you, Leslie—"

But she stopped suddenly, for Leslie spoke—spoke curious words, with a dreamy light in her eyes.

"I was not thinking of Ennisvale," she said.

Then Marcia was silent, and a deep hush fell in the flower-scented rooms. From without came the sound of pacing footsteps as Marcus and his guest passed to and fro upon the terrace without. When the sounds told Marcia that they were at the far end of the walk, she suddenly approached Leslie, and laid a hand upon her white shoulder.

"Whatever you decide, whatever you do," she said, speaking in a strange, tense voice, "do not make the terrible mistake of marrying without love!"

Leslie suddenly looked up into the face above her, and sought to read the meaning which it held.

"Then you do believe in married love?"

The question escaped the girl almost without volition. Marcia stood up straight. Her face was very pale.

"I do believe in married love," she answered

calmly ; " I think I do not believe in marriage—true marriage—without it."

Then she passed out of the window into the night, but she did not join the pacing figures. She glided quickly down the flight of steps, and vanished into the shadows of the garden below.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE KNIGHT AND THE LADY

"BEST BELOVED—oh, Best Beloved—do come! The dragon wants a drink of water from the lake, but my Knight says he can't let him go down to drink himself. He must fetch him his drink in a jug. And I know my Pretty Mamma wants some tea. Oh, do come, and tell them to bring the dragon inside! I do so want you to see him, Best Beloved; he is such a lovely dragon—and oh, how he can fly!"

The child was wildly excited. Two hours ago she had been called for by Ennisvale, with whom she had struck up an immense friendship, to come for a spin with him and Leslie on his motor-car. Now she burst in upon Percival with shining eyes, a dusty white frock, and a beaming face; and almost before he knew what he was doing, he was half-way to the gate, where stood the motionless car, with its owner looking inside.

Leslie was sitting on the seat beside the driver's, looking cool and dainty despite the wild spin she had been taking down the long road from the ridge.

She had pulled off her gauze veil, and her face was just a little flushed from the rapid motion. She was dressed all in silvery grey which was almost white, and it seemed as though no speck or soil were able to cling to her, or mar the perfection of her dress or person.

Ennisvale looked up with a smile as Percival appeared. He was dressed in a workmanlike suit of khaki colour that showed little trace of dust; but his hands were stained with oil, and he had a long smut across his brow, at sight of which Sweetheart laughed merrily.

"Ah, there you are, Eastlake; I was told your hospitality was good for a can of water for this dragon of mine. These hill roads of yours take it out of the beast a long sight more than flat country. May I run to the house and ask for it?"

"I should suggest your bringing the car inside and joining us over a cup of tea," said Percival, as he came forward and gave his hand to Leslie; "I hope The Den can run to that much in the matter of hospitality, though we have not a great reputation for the virtue."

"Thanks awfully," said Ennisvale readily. "The monster would be none the worse for a cooling down, and I must plead guilty to a most consuming thirst. Leslie, you are a provoking person—you never look hot, you never look thirsty, or the least bit ruffled in any respect. You might just have stepped out of a bandbox instead of

having been twenty miles since lunch in an automobile!"

Sweetheart was skipping about like a sprite, pulling hard at Percival's hand.

"Oh, do—do watch the dragon start!" she cried. "Oh, please, one of you, let Best Beloved get in to feel him go. He just stands shaking and wriggling, like as if he were lashing his tail, for a minute or two, and then my Knight does something, and he begins to go, and he goes faster and faster, snorts less and less loud, till it seems almost like flying; and when he flies he's quite quiet; but when they make him go slow or stop him, then he begins to swear again. Oh, do listen to him now! Isn't he a darling!"

The motor-car was just ready to start through the gate. Leslie skipped off her seat, and Sweetheart pulled and propelled Percival to the vacant place. Ennisvale sprang up, and the car glided onwards, whilst the child ran behind, shouting with glee, and Leslie followed more sedately, her cheeks glowing so that she put up her hand to feel the heat.

"You little fool!" she said sharply to herself; "I thought you had got over it. And now—just at sight of him—faugh! it's sickening! A man with a handsome face, and the nature of a coward!"

She had hitherto only seen the front of the low, picturesque bungalow house; but to-day they



were taken round into the recess of a charming garden.

Upon the velvet expanse of turf, emerald green, despite the heat, Leslie lay back in her chair and looked about her. It was a most wonderful garden, she decided, worthy of being owned by some magic being, or some deity from the page of mythological lore. Her glance roving round, lighted upon the face of Percival Eastlake, as he superintended Sweetheart in her efforts at tea-making. He was not, at that moment, looking her way; he was bending over the child. His face was wonderfully tender in its expression, and yet it was such a strong face, too. Leslie was one of those who only value gentleness and tenderness when associated with strength.

Here was a man with the face of one to be trusted—to be revered—even to be loved. And yet—and yet—how was it possible to regard him with such feelings? Was he not mixed up in some sort with that which was base and low? Might he not even be shielding himself behind the strength and the generosity of one whom he called his friend? Why should she not seek to wrest from this man that which Marcus had denied to her? If he knew the story of that fatal night, why should he not tell it to her?

With eyes alert and watchful she played her game, and before long she saw Ennisvale and Sweetheart walking contentedly away together, hand in hand, to go and attend to the wants of the dragon,

waiting for his refreshment on the other side of the house, whilst she and her host were left together, since she had been careful not to move, and he could not well leave her alone, even had he been so minded.

Leslie watched them disappear, and then she remarked :

"She is the sweetest little mortal. She looks and talks as though she had been brought up in a fairy garden. But what will you do with her when she grows older?"

"I sometimes ask myself that question ; but there is time to think of that still. She is barely six yet. And she is not backward. I teach her regularly myself."

"Oh, no, she is far from backward. Sometimes I think she is almost too forward. She sees and hears so much. So far it is all woven into her fairy-tale dream and scheme of life. But how long will that last?"

"A long while yet, I hope. I do not want that dream shattered before the time. Some of us live in it for a long, long while. Some few happy people are able to carry about with them almost through life a bright atmosphere, as though from some happy island of the summer seas."

His glance rested for a moment upon Leslie. She felt a curious thrill run through her. She could scarcely fail to understand the implied homage, quietly and impersonally though the words had been spoken. She brought herself up short, and

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spoke perhaps a little coldly in the effort at the control of her faculties.

"Sweetheart will probably receive her disillusionment early—and through the associations of those who live at Hill Top Farm."

He looked at her with a sudden questioning wonder.

"What makes you think that?"

"The child goes there. She meets the boy. The boy has been told too much—or too little. In time he will tell the secret to his little companion. The child's dreams will be shattered by the grim reality of some tragedy—some mystery. Mr. Eastlake, I wonder whether you realise that the chapter of tragedy is not yet closed?"

She had used the child as the pawn in the game—as the stepping-stone to the point which she had wished to reach. It mattered not to her that Sweetheart's life would be more shadowed were her private theory true than were things to remain on their present footing. She had roused Percival to a consciousness that she had some suspicions of coming trouble, and that was for the moment her aim and object.

He was regarding her fixedly. His face was grave. There was a questioning intensity in his gaze, something like what she had seen in Marcus Drummond's eyes some ten days earlier when she had sought to draw him. She did not wait for Percival to speak. She spoke herself rapidly and vehemently.

"So long as Ebenezer Raleigh believes that Marcus Drummond killed his son, so long I am convinced that Marcus Drummond is not safe. I have been again to the farm. I have seen Ruth Raleigh. I believe that some plot is on foot. I fancy even that he knows this himself. But he is a brave man—and brave men are sometimes rash. You are his friend. Are you never disturbed for his safety?"

"I am very often uneasy," answered Percival, in a low voice.

Leslie suddenly sprang to her feet and confronted him.

"Then why do you take no step to avert the peril?"

"What can I do?"

"You can tell the story of what happened that night at Wold Hall. You were there!"

She did not know that this charge was true. It had been surmised by strangers, but she had received no confirmation of the guess. Ruth Raleigh had proved as impenetrable as Marcus—and more enigmatic. Her only hope now lay in an audacious attack—in surprising the truth out of this man before he was on his guard. He had risen too, and stood before her—a tall figure against the golden westering light. She wished the glow behind him were less strong; it dazzled her eyes that she could not see his face clearly.

"I wonder what you mean, Miss Moncrieff," he said at last slowly.

"I mean that you could clear Marcus Drummond's name of all suspicion if you chose—and you keep silence."

"Marcus Drummond's name was cleared of suspicion at the outset. There has been no need of that."

"There is need! Ebenezer Raleigh believes him guilty, and is pursuing him with deadly malice. I tell you that until it is known who caused the death of his unhappy son, Marcus Drummond's name will never be entirely cleared. If you do not know that, it is because you live the life of a recluse, and do not hear the whispers and innuendoes of a curious and carping world. But letting the world alone—you know yourself the malice of that old man. Why do you let Marcus go in danger still, when a word from you would clear him?"

She was panting in her excitement. She was not quite sure that she had not already gone too far.

Then he spoke, and his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"I am acting under the direction of Marcus Drummond himself."

"I can believe that. Marcus Drummond is the sort of man to sacrifice himself for a friend, and scarcely know that he was so sacrificing himself. But is it right—is it just that he should do so?"

"I have questioned that myself many times," answered Percival. "I have discussed the question

with him ; but I cannot move him to another view."

Her eyes flashed.

"Then why do you not take law into your own hands and speak out like a man? If you were a man—"

She stopped short. She did not want to put it too frankly. She feared that already the scorn in her tones was all too audible.

"Marcus Drummond is not a man easy to controvert," said Percival, speaking with a studied restraint.

She flashed suddenly out at him : "Oh, what an argument for you to use !"

His voice was quite calm and restrained, contemplative rather than exculpative.

"And yet Marcus Drummond seems to me to have the right of veto in this matter. I may not agree with him ; but I may feel that he has the right to impose his decision."

"Oh," cried Leslie, pressing her hands together and speaking scarcely above a whisper—"oh, that you should speak so !"

Suddenly he seemed to wake as from a sort of trance. He made a forward step, and spoke in a different voice.

"Miss Moncrieff—you have startled me. You have taken me by surprise. But I have a right now to ask a question. What do you know about this mystery of Wold Hall?"

"It is less what I know than what I suspect ;

and I think that my suspicions come near to the truth."

He made no reply. He was studying her intently.

She sped a parting shaft at him.

"Marcus Drummond is now a married man. He has a wife to think for. Perhaps he does not realise himself all that that means. Can you not realise it for him? Is his wife to be sacrificed too?"

Then she turned and fled, figuratively if not literally. She had shot her last shaft. She realised that in her heart she had accused him of many things that were vile and cowardly. Did he understand this himself? Surely he must, if he were not quite blind. And he must hate her ever afterwards.

At that thought Leslie felt a sudden rush of tears to her eyes, and her throat swelled. But if she had spoken words which would bear fruit to Marcia's comfort and well-being, what else mattered?

She knew that Percival was following her with his slow stride. She heard the voice of the happy child hailing her from the house.

"Little Mamma—Pretty Mamma, the dragon is all ready, puffing and snorting, and your knight is just waiting to carry you off!"

Leslie quickly stepped to her seat; they waved adieux and Ennisvale shouted his thanks, for Percival had suddenly stopped short a little distance off.

The car glided round the sweep and out towards the gate.

“ He is her own true knight, isn't he, Best Beloved ?  
And I think they will presently go round the world  
together with their dragon ! ”



## CHAPTER XX

### THE VOICE OF RUMOUR

MARCIA sat alone in her octagon boudoir, lying back in her luxurious chair, amidst satin hangings, rich embroideries, and every accessory which taste and wealth can furnish. A book lay open on her lap, yet it was long since she had turned a page.

Winter — or its heralds — came earlier in this northerly region than Marcia had been accustomed to see. As a shriek like that of demon laughter shrilled round her outer walls, she shivered a little, and a troubled look crossed her face.

"I wish Marcus was at home," she said, half aloud.

Marcus was at Wold Hall again. His absences from Falconer's Hall had been rather more frequent of late. Some whisper in the wind warned Marcia that all was not going well at the pits. Marcus did not speak of it. He came and went with unclouded brow, with his habitual calm strength of aspect, and never a hint of trouble to be overcome, or peril to be faced. He showed solicitude that Marcia should continue to lead the kind of life to which she had

been accustomed, and it was he who had asked of Leslie to remain their guest through the autumn months, explaining that he expected to be a good deal from home as the season advanced, and desiring greatly that Marcia should not be left alone, and that she should have a companion to share the social gaieties which the neighbourhood had to offer when he was unable to accompany her himself. Leslie had consented with an almost eager show of readiness, cancelling several engagements in order to remain with Marcia. But Marcia was not quite sure that she was glad of this, though she had sedulously hidden this doubt from Leslie—almost from herself. For stronger than ever was growing the feeling that Marcus's real life was not spent at Falconer's Hall. He did not belong to it, save in name. Wold Hall and the pits held him in their grip. As she gazed into the dancing flames of the fire, she suddenly exclaimed aloud :

“I ought to be there—with him—at Wold Hall. If there be trouble looming, I have a right to know—a right to share it. And he keeps me here, lapped in luxury, and goes out to the battle—alone !”

It was a strange complaint for Marcia to make—she who had married not to share her husband's life, but to perform her part in a bargain, the terms of which had been rigorously observed on his side. She scarcely ever saw him alone now. With Leslie in the house, and Ennisvale coming and going at will, making head-quarters at Falconer's Hall, but

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dashing about the country on his automobile, paying brief visits here, there, and all over for shooting engagements, and returning at his own pleasure, always to find himself warmly welcomed, Marcia had few opportunities of *little-d-little* with her husband. He sat late at night over papers and letters in his study, and was always an early riser, often getting his breakfast and being off to the pits an hour before the rest of them gathered for the first meal of the day.

And now, thinking of all these things as she sat beside her fire this early day of chill October, Marcia felt quick, smarting tears rise in her eyes, and suddenly she broke into speech.

"What do I care? What is it to me? Why do I want his confidence? Why do I want a share in that inner life of his which I feel glowing and burning beneath the outward crust of cold lava? If he loved me he would understand; he would offer me the share which is my right. And if he does not, why did he marry me? Why did he wait and work for me those thirteen years—and make me prisoner at last? Why do I not hate him for that cold, calculating waiting and working? Why, when I think of it, do I feel proud that he should have kept my image before his eyes and in his thoughts all that time? I ought to feel degraded, but I do not. Has it come to this? Does all this mean that I am coming to love him?—just when it seems as though he were giving up all thought of loving me?"

She was twisting the delicate handkerchief she held in her hands, and at these words suddenly rent it across—her stress of feeling finding no other outlet. She looked at the divided fragments of lace and cambric, and a bitter smile crossed her face.

"Is it an omen?" she asked. "But that it cannot be. Some bonds are so firmly riveted that nothing can sever them. Some natures are so welded that there is no breaking them, no rending them in pieces, as this has been rent."

Then she stopped suddenly short, listening intently, her heart leaping and throbbing wildly for a moment. A man's step was approaching—approaching rapidly and firmly across the room of which her boudoir was the adjunct. It was no soft-footed servant. It was one who trod firmly with heavily-shod feet. Was it Marcus come to seek her at this unwonted hour—Marcus, whom she thought of as far away?

The door was flung open, and Ennisvale, splashed and travel-stained, stood before her. There was a rather strange expression on his face. It was seldom that Ennisvale looked stern or angry. She saw at once that something had occurred to disturb him, and she only held out her hands in welcome, waiting for him to speak.

"What is all this that I have been hearing about Marcus, Marcia?" he asked. "Surely you have heard nothing of the disgraceful tale!"

"What tale, Ennisvale?"

"Of that crime committed at Wold Hall, of which Marcus stood accused, though it seems he proved an alibi—"

"Surely that was enough!"

"Then you do know? I wonder you speak so coolly, though. What has Marcus got to say about it to you? I hear that to the neighbourhood he has never explained the mystery by so much as a word. He maintains a Sphinx-like silence; and as he inspires a ridiculous amount of awe in these parts, it appears nobody has ever had the pluck to drive the question home."

"What question?"

"The question everyone is asking. The question I mean to have answered. What was the meaning of all the 'goings on' (to use the current local phrase) at Wold Hall during a period covering several years? These goings on terminated by a crime, which has never been avenged upon the perpetrator. I say that Marcus Drummond, if not guilty of that deed of blood, is guilty of much, and should be called to account. I cannot understand why more excitement was not caused at the time. People talk enough now. Tell me, Marcia, what do you know of all this? You know that I wish to think the best of Marcus; but no fellow will put up with too much from a man risen from the ranks. When Marcus Drummond aspired to marry into our family, he should at least have done so with clean hands. It was condescension enough for a Defresne to marry a Drummond;

the record of that Drummond should have been beyond reproach. We had the right to expect that, at least."

Marcia was turning hot and cold by turns. She stood with her hand upon the mantel-shelf, her eyes upon her brother's face. Leslie Moncrieff, entering at the same moment, having heard of Ennisvale's return, caught the last phrases of his excited speech, and through her head the old jingle sounded once more :

"Change the name and not the letter,  
You change for the worse and not the better."

She almost felt as though she had spoken the words aloud, they sounded so clearly in her ears.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

Her words and her presence seemed to break the tension. Ennisvale turned to greet her, his face clearing for the moment, as though she brought sunshine in her wake. But it was only a break in the storm, for the cloud gathered again when greetings had been exchanged, and he turned to Leslie and said :

"I have been hearing rumours, have been trying to trace them to their source, to find out what all the vague talk means. Do you know anything about it? Do you know that Marcus Drummond is accused of having anything but a creditable record behind him, and is fully believed, in many quarters, only to have saved his neck by an uncommonly clever bit of hard riding, or some such trick as that. His alibi

appeared unimpeachable ; but why does such suspicion hang round him? Do you know anything of the story?"

"I have heard something," answered Leslie, with a keen look at Marcia, and a sense of constriction at heart which she could not account for; "but local gossip has no great charms for me."

"It is more than local gossip. It is a black story which wants explaining satisfactorily. I am not a man to make mole-hills into mountains; I only ask for an explanation. Marcia, your husband has probably given you this. I ask you one question—does it satisfy you? I do not want you to repeat to me all that he has said on the subject. But I ask you whether his explanation is one which is satisfactory to you, and would be to others?" and Ennisvale regarded her steadily, as a man who is willing to be generous and to maintain an open mind, but requires satisfaction up to a certain point.

Marcia threw back her head, and her dark eyes began to glow.

"I have never asked Marcus for any explanation," she said, with extreme quietude of manner, and a touch of hauteur which was new in her dealings with Ennisvale.

He looked at her fixedly in surprise and displeasure.

"Do you mean that you have heard these rumours, and that you have not asked for an explanation?"

"I mean just that."

"Then, Marcia, you are doing very wrong."

Her glance did not fall, but she spoke no word.

"I know what is in your mind," suddenly broke out Ennisvale, with indignation. "You do not ask, because you know that you would receive no answer. Your husband would refuse his confidence."

"Wrong!" broke out Marcia, with a sudden flash of something that might be anger or triumph or scorn. "I know, on the contrary, that I have but to put the question to receive a full and satisfactory explanation."

"Then why, in Heaven's name, do you not put it?"

"Because I believe that were it advisable for me to hear the story, my husband would have told me of his own initiative."

"You believe that?"

"I do!"

Ennisvale turned away with a curious fling.

"I never thought you a credulous fool before, Marcia!"

She made no reply; she only stood in that slightly rigid pose. She knew that her brother, though sweet-tempered, was also hot-tempered, and that self-control was not his strong point.

The next minute Ennisvale had recovered himself.

"I beg your pardon, Marcia; I should not have said that. But I am put out, and I have cause to be. Tell me this—have you any reason to believe that Marcus would answer your questions if you put them, and answer them truthfully?"



A little gleam showed in her eyes, but her voice was calm.

"I have his own word for it. He invited me to ask him any question that I wished. And for the rest, I do not think that my husband is a man to stoop to falsehood."

"Then," spoke Ennisvale, with a brow which was still thundery, though it had cleared to some extent—"then your course is clear. I will take you across to Wold Hall to-morrow, and you shall there ask for the full explanation. I shall be satisfied if you are. At least, I will try to be. Of course, if you can tell me the whole story—"

"That will be impossible, Ennisvale; for I shall not ask Marcus to tell me anything."

"You will not?"

"I positively and entirely refuse."

"You will not let me take you to Wold Hall and demand an explanation?"

"No, Ennisvale—I will not!"

"And your reason?"

"Is that I trust my husband absolutely. I have spoken my last word on the subject!"

She turned then, and quietly walked out of the room with the tread of an empress. Ennisvale looked helplessly at Leslie, and asked:

"Is she mad?"

"I don't know—just a little, perhaps; but it is a splendid sort of madness. Oh, Ennisvale, can't you see what is coming? If you can't, I won't enlighten you in your present mood."

He stood gloomily beside the fire for a while, and then broke out :

“ Well, if she won't do it, I will go and do it myself.”

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM.

THE two men stood facing each other in the grim panelled room at Wold Hall, where Ennisvale had surprised the master of the house on his return thither at dusk. That was half an hour ago, and the gloom was increasing each moment, though in the red glow of the fire this was scarcely noted.

Ennisvale's face was flushed and angry. That of Marcus was as quiet and inscrutable as ever. He had not given his adversary one single point. Not a word—not a look had escaped him to betray him in the smallest respect. Ennisvale felt as he had once done when fencing in a Paris fencing hall with a master of the art. His weapon seemed to be a child's toy; that of his adversary like a wall of solid rock. It had been a curious sensation then, to one who had rather prided himself on his sword-play. He felt the same baffled sensation now—he whose amiability, graciousness, and charm of manner had generally won him confidence and success both amongst men and women.

"I am sorry you take it like that," spoke Marcus quietly, the inflexible note in his voice making itself

distinctly heard above the restrained and courteous regret. "I have not denied that there are other matters in the past which I also regret. But I have no explanation to offer—to you. That page of history is closed. There is only one person who has any right to read it now. That person is my wife: Have you come with any authority from her?"

This question leaped suddenly forth—red - hot, from the coolness of the former words. Ennisvale felt the change. But he would not stoop to subterfuge, even though he might thus score a point.

"I do not come from her. She has refused to ask the question for herself, which I, as her brother, demand answered. I am her lawful and rightful protector—"

"Pardon me," answered Marcus, drawing himself up to his full height, "I am her lawful and rightful protector."

"And you deceive her—and deny her her due!"

"I do not deceive her—and I will give to her whatever she asks of me. If she be wise enough to refrain from asking certain things, I shall abide by that wisdom—and hold my peace."

"And live with a shadow between you I—and ruin her happiness!" panted Ennisvale, trying to keep calm, but conscious of a great and rising anger.

The face before him betrayed nothing. Marcus had his back to the fire; the light played strong upon Ennisvale's face, which was flushed with irritation and passion. Perhaps he was the only member of his family who had not fully understood that which

Marcia had done in marrying this man, nor what his part in the compact had been. Marcia had insisted upon silence where her brother was concerned. She did not wish him to know how much his future would be changed by that transfer of mortgage bonds into her hands. He knew that worldly prosperity had followed this marriage of his sister to Marcus Drummond; but Ennisvale was at heart a born aristocrat, and his private opinion was that it was Marcus who had chiefly profited by the alliance. He had a wife with some of the oldest and best blood of the realm running in her veins. His family would be ennobled by this, as his money never could ennoble it. If Marcus Drummond failed to understand this, it was because by descent he was plebeian. Was he also, in spite of his iron will and inflexibility of demeanour, something of a coward at heart? Was he afraid of exposure?

Ennisvale rapidly reviewed the situation, drawing his breath rather hard. His mind worked with lightning quickness. There was only a very short pause before he spoke again. But in that time his tone had changed. From impulsive heat it had assumed an icy coldness, and there was the suspicion of a sneer in his voice.

"I begin to understand," he said slowly.

Again Marcus made no reply. He had no wish to quarrel with Marcia's brother. He liked Ennisvale. There was something frank and boyish about him which attracted the elder man. He looked boyish enough this evening, despite his anger and

his assumed judicial bearing. There was just enough likeness to Marcia in his aspect to touch and hold the heart of the husband, and restrain him from the curt, sharp dismissal which he would have given to any other man who had come to him upon such an errand.

"Marcia—my sister—is the only person to whom you will confide your guilty secret; but you do not wish to burden her with it. Am I right so far?"

"If the secret be a guilty one—a point I should be willing to leave to my wife's judgment—you are right so far."

"A secret involving a murder is generally held to contain the elements of guilt," spoke Ennisvale, still striving after calmness of manner. "And a man is very safe in taking his wife into his confidence, seeing that she is the one person in the world who may not bear witness against him. I congratulate you upon your sagacity!"

There was dead silence in the room for about the space of a minute, broken only by the deep breathing of the two men. Then Marcus spoke:

"Have you anything else to say?"

"No."

"Then, as the light is fast waning, I will not detain you longer; unless you will do me the honour to accept the hospitality of Wold Hall for the night."

"I thank you, but I will go. You will not find me at Falconer's Hall either on your return. So I

will take the opportunity of thanking you for the hospitality I have received there already."

"Falconer's Hall is Marcia's house," answered Marcus, in level tones. "Your thanks are owed not to me, but to her. You can remember that in the future if you choose. This house is mine. The other is hers."

A number of hot, stinging retorts sprang to Ennisvale's lips; but no words passed them.

So for an appreciable time the pair stood facing one another, and then Ennisvale turned and quitted the room without any formula of farewell, leaving Marcus standing as before, his towering black figure before the fire throwing a gigantic shadow across the ceiling and wall opposite, his firm, square face set like that of some statue of bronze.

Percival Eastlake sat solitary beside the fire, the wild October gales shrilling and raving across the lake and through the trees on the heights above, and wailing from time to time round the angles of that sheltered house, with a cry like that of some lost child weeping its heart out in the darkness.

Sweetheart was in bed and asleep. Percival had stolen in more than once to look at her, and make sure that the storm was not disturbing her childish slumbers. Now he sat dreaming over his fire alone, and before him, upon the mantel-shelf, stood a photograph—a long "promenade" portrait, representing a beautiful young girl in full Court dress, with white plumes and graceful train—a soft, fairy

like elegance of billowy lace, gauzy chiffon, and long sprays of flowers disposed with artistic grace. This photograph was the property of Sweetheart, who had begged it from the original ; but it had been set up in such a position that Percival's eyes rested naturally upon it as he lay back in his easy-chair. The bright sweet eyes seemed to be looking full into his ; the lips seemed just parted for some gay badinage—it was hard not to think they smiled as one watched. At the foot of the portrait were traced in fine characteristic penmanship the words, "Leslie Moncrieff."

He had seen her many times of late. For the child's sake he had been more than once to Falconer's Hall. Once, on the little one's birthday, one glowing September day, before the sudden change from summer to autumn, Marcia and Leslie had spent a long day at The Den, rowing on the lake, visiting all the garden haunts, making a golden day for the happy child. And ever since the place seemed to Percival to hold the echoes of her sweet voice. That she was not for him he had realised ever since Ennisvale's arrival. It was whispered all through the neighbourhood that the pair were affianced.

Suddenly his meditations were interrupted by the opening of the door. He had heard no sound of arrival, and sprang up to find himself confronted by Ennisvale, who presented the ruffled and tumbled aspect of a man who has been fighting with the storm, though he had left his dripping overcoat in



the hall outside. Percival's eyes lighted with pleasure. His hand was outstretched in welcome.

"I lost myself on the fells in the storm. I was making for Dale Farm; but it is as dark as pitch, and I must have missed the road. I saw lights—and found myself here."

"Where you will assuredly remain till morning," interposed Percival, his hand on the bell. "You must have something hot to take, and slippers to replace those wet boots. I am very glad to see you. These stormy nights are eerie things. One prefers the sound of a human voice to all that wild wailing of the wind outside."

Matters were soon settled between the men. Ennisvale was pretty well worn out by his long tramp. His face was unwontedly grave and pale, and as he sipped his steaming glass and looked across at his host, he asked gravely:

"Have you heard any news?"

"No; the weather has held us prisoners this last little spell. Is anything afoot?"

"I am afraid so. I don't like what I hear and see. Did you know that I had left Falconer's Hall? I have had a difference with its owner. I have taken Marcus Drummond to task—with what result you who know him may be able to guess."

Percival's face slightly changed.

"You have quarrelled with him, you mean?"

"Not actually; but I spoke my mind to him. I told him there had been mystery and concealment enough, and that the time had come when, for

Marcia's sake, he ought to explain the whole matter. It is monstrous that he should permit his name to be whispered abroad as connected with a brutal crime—unless, indeed, he be the perpetrator of it; and if so, he did a hideous wrong in marrying my sister!”

“No, no!” cried Percival quickly; “do not say that!”

Ennisvale looked at him quickly and shrewdly.

“You are his friend; I wonder how much you know.”

“I know enough to exonerate Marcus from every imputation, save, perhaps, that of a mistaken sense of honour. I myself think that the time to speak has now come. But it will be a difficult matter to persuade him of it.”

“Do you know also that the wild old man, Ebenezer Raleigh, who has been biding his time with a relentless pertinacity like that of a sleuth-hound, has now worked up something very like a conspiracy against Marcus Drummond amongst the pit-hands? I don't know the ins and outs—”

“That has been his game this long while,” spoke Percival. “Marcus is well aware of it. He has been doing mischief silently for a long time. He is taking advantage now of a sudden wave of discontent—the result of trade complications which affect the price and output of coal in these parts. But I do not think it will find Marcus unprepared.”

“And is my sister to suffer anxiety and possibly personal violence, to be perhaps widowed before she has been a year a wife; for who knows when trouble

begins how it will end? It comes to this, Eastlake, either Marcus is guilty, and prefers to defy the world and take any other risk rather than declare himself, in which, perhaps, he may be right from his own point of view; or he is not guilty, in which case he is acting like a madman; and for the sake of his wife, if for no other reason, he should be made to speak out, at whatever cost to his own pride or obstinacy."

Percival was exceedingly grave and thoughtful. It was long before he spoke, and then he said slowly:

"I have been thinking something of this myself of late. I think things are being carried too far now. I shall speak to Marcus myself before long. Whether or not I shall be able to move him is another matter."

"He must be moved!" spoke Ennisvale, almost fiercely. "Or you must speak yourself, Eastlake. Perhaps that would be the best."

But Percival made no sign; his face for the moment was as inscrutable as that of Marcus. And again Ennisvale felt curiously baffled and nonplussed.

Next morning at breakfast-time Sweetheart looked suddenly up and asked:

"Best Beloved, what is a 'splosion?"

"Why do you ask, Sweetheart? What do you know about such big things as that?"

"It was Mark told me. He came down yesterday before it was dark. He said that old Ebensneezer was

going to make a 'splosion in Big Marcus's mine. He didn't know when ; but he thought it would be soon. He said there would be a big banging noise, and p'raps the pit would be spoilt afterwards. Isn't it rather naughty of him ? I asked Mark ; but he wouldn't answer. I wonder if it will be to-day ; and if Big Marcus will mind much ? ”

The two men looked across the table at each other, then Ennisvale uttered a subdued exclamation, and rose quickly to his feet.

## CHAPTER XXII

### AN ACT OF VENGEANCE

A LONG, low, distant rumbling made itself heard, and the foundations of the house seemed to shake and quiver.

Marcia looked up from her writing-table, and Leslie rose to her feet and ran to the window. But nothing was to be seen from there; and now all was silence, and the faint vibration had ceased.

"What was it?" spoke Marcia.

"It felt like a little baby earthquake. One does hear of them from time to time. If there had been any gas-works near, one might have thought it an explosion, but—"

"The colliery!" spoke Marcia quickly, and her face grew perceptibly paler. "It is an explosion at the pits—Marcus's pits."

"But, my dear Marcia, they are so far away. Should we have felt it?"

"Yes, far away by road; but as the crow flies, across the fell, not so very far. Leslie, I am certain of it, something has happened at the pits. I am going at once to see, to be of use if I can. Help may be wanted."

Her hand was on the bell. The next minute the butler was in their presence.

"What was that noise, Block? Did you hear it?"

"Yes, my lady. It felt like a bit of an explosion, I thought. Only there are no works hereabouts—"

"There are the pits. There has been an explosion there. I am convinced of it. I want the light carriage got ready instantly, and the dog-cart also. You had better come with me, Block. And send Mrs. Henderson here at once. If there has been an accident, we shall want to take with us the things likely to be most urgently wanted. Make haste; I wish to start as soon as possible." And as the servant was hurrying away, she added: "I shall not be back to-night, in all probability. I shall remain at Wold Hall."

The man disappeared, and Leslie exclaimed:

"But, Marcia, what will Marcus say?"

"My place is with my husband in any time of danger," answered Marcia quietly. "You will excuse my running away from you, Leslie dear; you see, I treat you as a sister."

"You will not run away, for I shall go with you."

Marcia gave her a quick, keen look.

"But, dearest, there may be sad and painful sights to see; and Wold Hall is not like Falconer's Hall. The accommodation is very rough—not what you are accustomed to."

"You are going yourself."

"I am going to my husband."

"And I am going with you. No, Marcia, don't"

try to stop me. It's no manner of use. I feel stifled sometimes with all this luxury, this plethora of service, this soft life with all its pleasant, artificial conditions. I want to get away—I want to get nearer the heart of things. I want to feel the elemental passions at work beneath the surface. Do you know what I mean? If there be need of help, let me help too. If there be tragedy at our doors, let me be there to give what aid I can. If there be weeping women to comfort, terrified children to calm, let me do what I can for them. If there be savage passions at work in the hearts of fierce men, even then let me be there to watch. Let me live a real life for once—let me see what life is like without all these trappings which disguise it.”

Marcia argued no more. Glad was she of Leslie's company, for she knew not what lay before her. Twice had she visited the pit village, and each time had she come away with a gnawing fear at her heart—fear not for herself, but for her husband.

All the while that the carriage was driving them onwards, as rapidly as the state of the roads would permit, Marcia sat with clasped hands and unseeing eyes, her thoughts always centred about one idea. What had happened? And where was Marcus when it happened? As they passed the telegraph office she stopped the carriage to ask if any message had come through to her. The answer was in the negative. A wire had come from the pits to the effect that an explosion had taken place there; but

of its nature or scope they had received no intimation whatever.

"It may be quite a small affair, Marcia," said Leslie, as they drove off again. "Do not look like that."

For there was a gathering horror in Marcia's eyes which she could not hide from Leslie. She wrung her hands together as she cried :

"It will be Marcus who is the victim—I feel it! I seem to know it! I shall lose him—and he will never know—"

She stopped short. Leslie was too wise to ask any question, but in her heart she knew what Marcia would have said. The wife had grown little by little to love her husband. The veil was about to be torn from her eyes, if indeed it still obscured her vision. She loved her husband—and she knew it. But would he ever know how it was with her?

The doubt was anguish even to Leslie, yet her hopeful nature would not forecast evil. Putting her hands upon Marcia's, she said :

"It will all come right, dear—you will see. You have been so loyal to him all through. You have trusted him in the teeth of opposition and those hundred thousand little things which would have set another woman doubting and suspecting. You are worthy of him, and he of you. It will all come right—it will all come right! You are going to him now—in the moment of peril. You will see that all will be right now."

The storm of the previous night had torn up the



road as they neared the pits, and the water came rushing down, frightening the horses, who had to be encouraged to face it. They noted that as they passed the first rows of houses, not a sign of life was to be observed, save a few very young children, watching over some babies, who had been apparently collected in one dry outhouse, and left to the charge of the tiny toddlers playing in the dust beside them. Not a woman or girl or boy was to be seen.

"They are all gone to the pits—to get news!" spoke Marcia to herself, her lips being too dry to enunciate the words aloud. The horses dashed forward now without check. Soon the outskirts of the place were reached. Suddenly the heavy silence was broken by the commencement of a throbbing, rhythmical sound, and in a moment a wild, hoarse cheer went up, emphasised by a deep and quivering sob; and some articulate words shouted by a group on the outskirts of the crowd penetrated the senses of the party in the carriage.

"The engine's started—the engine's at work again—thank God for that!"

The coachman turned round, and Block was at the carriage door.

"The horses can't go any farther, my lady, for the crowd; and they are getting a bit restive with all the noise and shouting, too."

"I will get out," spoke Marcia quietly. "Take the horses out of the crowd, Hall, and wait till I send you word what to do. Block will stay with me."

Leslie sprang out after Marcia. It was a strange

scene upon which their eyes fell. All around them lay the great heaps of refuse from the pits, whilst stacks of coal loomed up in gigantic walls, grim against the stormy brightness of the sky. The air seemed charged with a palpitating excitement, voiced, as it were, by the regular vibrating throb of the mighty engine. It was no wonder that the starting once more of the engine, which for two long hours had been mute and motionless, raised a cheer and a shout, and drew sobs and tears from the women. That pale-faced, smutty crowd around the engine-house and central shaft spoke eloquently of the fear of tragedy which dominated all hearts. Even the arrival of Marcia's carriage had scarcely caused one head to turn in her direction. As now she approached a knot of women who were standing on the outskirts of the crowd, with some frightened children clinging to their skirts, she had to put the question twice before she received any answer.

Then wild, haggard faces were turned towards her, and she found that though these women were utter strangers to her, yet that her personality was known to them.

"Oh, my lady, we don't know yet! There were two hundred down when the explosion came. They say most of them have got up safe; but there's some down still. Whether alive or dead, none can say yet. They may be buried alive, or they may be safe somewhere in the pits or galleries, if the choke-damp hasn't took them off. There was no going down to see till the engine started, and some said

it was damaged past working. But the master he's been with the engineer all the time, and if any could start it we knew he would. God be thanked, 'tis off again now! And the rescue party will be going down soon."

The woman spoke in the rough northern dialect which was only beginning to be intelligible to Marcia; but her anxiety quickened her powers of comprehension, and she grasped the meaning of every word to-day.

"Is there danger for those who go down?" she asked.

"Danger! 'Tis the dangerest task as they can set themselves to. You never know what you're going into down the shaft—fire or water, or the choke-damp. Or may be some fresh explosion. Once the mischief starts, you never know when the end will be. God be with the lads as go down the shaft with the master!"

Marcia suddenly caught her breath. "With the master?" she echoed.

The woman regarded her with curious eyes, as though doubtful what to answer. But the imperious insistence of Marcia's gaze seemed to draw the words from her whether she would or no.

"Why, yes, my lady," she said, speaking slowly. "There's never been a rescue party in these pits ever since the master was a lad, but he's been the one to lead it. The boys may grumble as they like about him, and call him all the names they can put their tongues to. but there isn't one that doesn't know as

the master stands shoulder to shoulder with them whenever there's danger to be faced. Nay, more—he leads them, and takes the post of greatest peril himself, as you'll see in a minute if you wait. I do say as men who talk agin' the master don't know when they're well off."

At that moment, as though in corroboration of the woman's words, a clear, resonant voice rang out from the heart of the crowd, dominating the thick, excited hum of human voices and the throb of the pulsating engine.

"Who goes with me?" cried Marcus. "Nine in the cage with me, and ten to follow. We will send up for more help if wanted. There are thirty men not yet come up. Who volunteers for the rescue?"

The crowd seemed to surge and heave like a living thing. Leslie kept close beside Marcia, feeling as one in a dream; and the crowd opening before them, seemed to close up behind and drive them into the very centre as by the impulse of a common understanding.

Suddenly the pressure seemed to give way. Marcia found herself standing upon the outer margin of an open space. Within that space hard-fisted, smoke-grimed sons of toil, with lanterns and spades and picks, were moving rapidly to and fro like figures in a dream, hailing each other in rough accents, and bawling out uncouth salutations or farewells to their comrades pressing round. The centre of this open space was the cage at the mouth of the shaft, beside which stood a figure of imposing height

and build, even amongst those robust specimens of northcountry manhood. A faint, sulphurous cloud ascended from the shaft, and a young man, with eager eyes and an alert manner, seemed to be making certain tests and calculations as he leaned over inhaling it.

At that moment the eyes of husband and wife met, and with an inarticulate exclamation Marcus stepped forward.

"Marcia—you here!"

"I heard the explosion. I thought help might be wanted. I have brought such things with me as may be useful to the injured. Shall I leave them here—with the women—or take them to Wold Hall?"

His face had lighted strangely beneath its coat of blackened smoke, which gave him a weirdness of aspect which was curious in a man who always appeared so well-groomed and fastidiously clean.

He looked at his blackened hands, which he had for a moment stretched out towards her, and he let them fall to his side.

"I am not fit to touch you. I have been in the engine-house. But I thank you for your thought. It was like you. The foreman shall deal with your supplies, Marcia. They may be wanted. We do not know yet what we shall find; but—"

"Marcus, send the foreman down; why should you go?"

In a low voice he answered her:

"Because they will not go without me. You will

not hold me back from my duty, Marcia. Those men below are our servants and fellow-labourers. If help does not reach them, they must perish. If we succeed in reaching them, they have a chance. It is my place to go and see. I tell you, not one man will budge without me ! ”

“ Then there is danger ? ”

“ Yes,” he answered quietly, “ there is danger. But it is a danger I have faced unscathed many times before—and we shall take every precaution. I thank you for coming, Marcia. But go home now. You shall have early notice—”

“ I shall remain at Wold Hall,” spoke Marcia, with a note in her voice as inflexible as his own. “ If your place is there, Marcus,” indicating the smoking cauldron of the shaft—“ mine is at your house, near to you. Come back to me there as soon as you can. Take every care—for my sake, if not your own.”

His eyes lighted once more. His hands were outstretched, and hers met them in a clasp such as had never passed between them before. Leslie was certain but that for the presence of the crowd about the pit’s mouth, he would have kissed the quivering face turned up towards him.

“ Take care of her, Leslie,” said Marcus, betraying his emotion by the use of her Christian name ; and then he sprang back to his place in the cage, and a mighty cloud-shaking shout went up as the rescue party sank out of sight.

Marcia, her eyes blinded by tears, turned away,

letting Leslie guide her steps ; and the crowd made way for her in respectful silence. As they approached the carriage waiting for them on the outskirts of the settlement, neither of them saw a wild, haggard face peer out at them as they passed from the shelter of some stunted bushes, or heard the low demoniac laugh of the old dalesman as he cried :

“The first blow has been struck already ; the second follows. The righteous vengeance shall overtake the evil-doer, and he shall cumber the earth no more !”

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ENLIGHTENMENT

"MARCIA, is it you?"

"Ennisvale! Ah, I am glad you are here! Have you heard? Have you come to help?"

Leslie at the same moment found herself confronted by Percival Eastlake, and their hands met in an instinctive grasp of sympathy before either had quite realised it.

It was at Wold Hall that these unexpected encounters took place. Eastlake spoke in explanation.

"Ennisvale spent the night with me. We heard the ghost of a rumour which disquieted us. We walked over to Hill Top Farm a short while back. What we found there disturbed us more—"

"What was that?"

"Ebenezer Raleigh had not been seen at home for two days. Ruth was in unconcealed anxiety. Mark, the boy, declared that he had heard the old man plotting with some of the agitators and discontented pit hands to wreck some portion of the mine. We were afraid it might go further than that. We were afraid that some act of vengeance upon Marcus might be contemplated."



"Vengeance!" ejaculated Leslie quickly; "ah!"

He saw the flash of her eyes; he felt it in some sort inimical to himself, and yet he did not entirely understand it, though he had a clue to her feelings.

"Then came the report of the explosion. We knew we had come too late to avert disaster; but there may yet be work for us to do. We came here to see. I am not quick upon my feet, or we should have arrived earlier. Have you come from the pits? Do you know what has happened there?"

"An explosion of some sort. There are thirty men still below. Marcus Drummond is already leading a rescue party down the shaft. We saw it start."

"Then he is not hurt?"

"He is safe so far. Did you expect it otherwise?"

"I feared that if some devilry were afoot, they would try to strike not at property alone, but at life. Marcus spends much time in the workings, especially if anything seems amiss. He is to a great extent his own engineer and his own expert in mining matters. All this is very well known. My fear was lest the explosion had been timed—if, indeed, it be the result of man's wickedness—at an hour when he was down the shaft, perhaps almost alone. I trust and hope—this being not the case—that the explosion will prove to be nothing beyond accident. Accidents are bad enough; but malice is infinitely worse."

Marcia had her hand upon her brother's arm, and was pacing with him up and down in front of the

grim stone house to which she had so strangely come. Leslie and Percival were thus left, as it were, together, and the excitement under which the girl had been labouring now vented itself in some hot, impassioned words.

"You knew that Marcus was in danger—perhaps of his very life ; and yet you did not speak !"

His face was slightly troubled as he met her searching gaze, in which there blazed a certain fine feminine scorn.

"It is more difficult than you can guess to influence Marcus. He is a man of inflexible purpose ; and personal fear is a sensation unknown to him."

"I am not speaking of him—I am speaking of you !" flashed Leslie.

"Of—me ?" He spoke the two words with a pause between, tentatively and inquiringly.

Her patience gave way. She dropped all veiling language. She spoke incisively and indignantly.

"Yes, you—you who let another man stand in jeopardy of his very life, that he may screen you from the consequences of your own act of sudden madness !"

His gaze was fixed full upon her face. A light as of comprehension dawned in his eyes. She went on unheeding, her excitement growing fast :

"Marcus Drummond is screening some other man from the consequences of an act which might bring him within the arm of the law. So long as he was able to do this with impunity, so long might you



perhaps hold yourself justified in permitting it. But now—if it becomes a question of his safety or yours—how can you—how can you?”

She was almost panting in her excitement. She felt that even now it might not be too late to save Marcus from some threatened peril. She could not pause to consider how this clearing of him might affect Percival Eastlake's fate, or whether he might not be courting his own ruin. Just at this moment nothing seemed to matter save that the awful fear hanging over Marcia should be averted, and that the stain which she felt now rested upon Percival himself should be washed away. So long as he could suffer another to bear the load which was rightfully his own, how could she feel towards him anything but indignation and scorn?

“Let me understand you, Miss Moncrieff. You have reached the conclusion that Marcus, in the matter of the tragedy enacted in this place two and a half years ago, is shielding another by his silence.”

“I thought you had admitted as much yourself the last time we spoke of this.”

“Perhaps I did—by not denying it. But I did not then suspect that you did me the honour to believe me to be that person.”

She eyed him gravely, almost distrustfully. “Was it not you?”

“May I ask what reason you have for thinking that it was?”

Leslie began turning matters over in her mind.

Had she indeed leaped too rapidly to a conclusion? True, the surmise had not been originated by herself. It had been suggested by another; but that person seemed to have some considerable amount of circumstantial evidence to adduce: the friendship between the two men; the fact of constant meetings; the mastery of the wild black horse by Percival Eastlake—that horse which evidently played a great part in the superstitious fears of the dalesfolk, who had watched with fear and wonder the “goings on” at Wold Hall. But confronted by Percival’s steadfast glance and by his quiet question, she all at once began to falter and wonder. Her own words sounded feeble in her ears as she made reply:

“You are his greatest friend—and you know all about it.”

“And you think that our friendship is the reason why I should shield myself behind him—to his cost. Do you think that my hand struck down Luke Raleigh? and that since Marcus was able to prove his alibi in the eyes of the law, I was careless as to what was thought or suspected or whispered concerning him in his own neighbourhood—or was willing to see him relentlessly pursued by the half-insane enmity of the outraged father?”

Leslie was faltering now. Something in that clear, frank glance caused her suspicions to drop away, as the mist rolls from the valleys before the breeze of the dawn.

“I thought that perhaps it had been agreed upon as best at first, and that now Marcus was coercing

you. Only I did not wish that you should be coerced. I wanted you to speak the truth and face the consequences. Forgive me that I misjudged you !”

Her hand went out towards him. He took it and held it, and a great light shone in his eyes.

“I am glad to know. I felt I had won your displeasure, and feared I had merited it. Perhaps I cannot yet appease you ; for without the consent of Marcus, which hitherto I have been unable to obtain, I cannot still explain that which you would ask.”

“Not to save him from deadly peril ?”

Percival looked her full in the eyes.

“It would not save him from that,” he said, “if you allude to the vindictive malice of Ebenezer Raleigh.”

She gazed at him questioningly. “Not if he knew—it were some other man ?”

“He would not believe it. Nothing will convince him, unless that other man be produced.”

“Then produce him !”

“That is impossible.”

“Is he dead too ?”

“I do not know. He has vanished from my ken. I have not seen nor heard of him—since that night.”

“But Marcus—does he know ? Could he not lay hands on him ?”

“That I cannot tell. Marcus has his secrets even from me. I have no idea whether this man be living or dead.”

Leslie stood still and rigid, debating the situation in her own mind. New light seemed falling across the shadows of mystery. Here upon the very spot where some tragedy had been enacted years before, she was secretly pledging herself to the unravelling of the secret which enshrouded them all, and which menaced Marcus — perhaps already—to his destruction. Her eyes dilated, her breath came in deep-drawn suspirations.

"He will tell Marcia!" she exclaimed, in a low voice. "It is Marcia who must ask him."

Percival regarded her steadfastly.

"Yes—he will tell his wife," he answered. "When you come to know Marcus as I know him, Miss Moncrieff, you will find that, though he is like adamant rock to threat or menace, he is the most considerate as well as the staunchest of friends, and that his love, where it is once given, is only to be gauged by the depth and strength of his nature."

"I know," spoke Leslie briefly; "I have known it from the first. And he loves Marcia."

"As it is given to few women to be loved."

Their eyes met. A curious electric thrill seemed to pass from brain to brain, or from heart to heart. The colour rose in Leslie's cheek in pulsating waves, whilst his grew somewhat more pale than usual with the compelling stress of his feeling. They looked for a moment at each other, and then looked away. Marcia was advancing towards them, the strained whiteness of her face seeming to Leslie almost like a

reproach upon her own strange glow of sub-conscious happiness.

"I cannot stay here!" spoke Marcia; "I must be nearer to the spot. I thought Wold Hall would be near enough; but it is not—it is not. I must know what is happening from half-hour to half-hour, from minute to minute. We can only learn that by being on the spot. Ennisvale is here. He will go with me. Leslie, you will not mind being left here. But I cannot stay. Or will you be sent back to Falconer's Hall? The carriage is still here. But I shall not keep it. I have everything here that I need for a night. I shall send it away. I remain here."

"And I too," answered Leslie instantly. "I brought my bag also. As though I would ever leave you at such a time, Marcia! If you go back to the pits, I go too."

"You cannot do anything there," said Ennisvale, a little uneasily. "You had better let me go with Eastlake, and we will send messages to you constantly as to what is happening. It is no place for you or Leslie."

Ennisvale looked round for Percival, as though to bid him adduce some argument to support him; and as they followed the direction of his glance, they saw that he was moving away towards a small flying figure that was making for Wold Hall in a bee-line, and came from the direction of the pits.

"It is little Mark Raleigh," spoke Marcia quickly. "He brings news," and she flew towards him, followed by the others.

They all met together at the spot where the hot and panting boy paused to recover breath. His glance was for Percival, who was the first to understand the significance of the words, which, owing to the boy's breathless excitement, were hardly intelligible to the others.

"Grandfather has gone down the mine to the master! He's there now. He didn't come up!"

Percival's face slightly changed colour and expression.

"Down the mine, Mark! How could he get down? Only miners were allowed."

"He did. He got another man to change hats and coats with him. They were crowding round to see the cage go. They did it ever so quick. I saw them. If the others did, they knew about it beforehand, and didn't say nothing. Mr. Fergus didn't see or know. Then the cage went down. Grandfather was on it. It was with the second lot. The master would have seen and sent him back. Rather soon the cage came up again; some of the first lot came up, choking, and some men they've found. I don't know whether they were deaders or not. But grandfather didn't come back. I ran and told Mammy Ruth, and she sent me to tell you. She said you'd be certain sure to be at Wold Hall if you weren't at the pits. I knew you weren't there, else I'd have seen you. So I came here."

Marcia looked at Percival as though for some explanation of these words; but though his face was very grave and stern, he did not speak. The



haunting fear for her husband's safety grew more intense each moment. He was down in the heart of that awful seething cauldron, surrounded by perils more than she could estimate. And now it seemed that his deadly enemy was down there also—the man who was pledged to his destruction! Did she need other explanation to make the situation clear?

"We must go to the pits at once," she said, pale as marble, yet quiet and composed in manner. "The foreman must be notified of this. No unauthorised person should be passed down the shaft at such a time. Of that I am convinced. My word should have some weight. My husband's life may even now be in peril."

The boy looked at her with grave, comprehending eyes.

"Grandfather will do him a mischief if he can. Mother said it, and I've heard him talking to himself lots and lots of times. If he's down the mine with the master now, he'll watch his chance, you'll see."

"There is not a moment to lose," spoke Marcia, and sped swiftly back towards the house to summon the carriage once more.

At that same moment Block came hurrying up from the pits. He had been left behind to follow them when there should be any news to report.

"I came to tell you, my lady," he said, as Marcia hastened towards him, "that the first lot of men who went down are all up again, except the master, and

have brought up more than half of those who could not escape after the explosion. Three of these are certainly dead, and three more are very like to die now ; though they think the rest will live. But the air down below is very bad, though they're pumping all they know."

"Why did not your master come up too ?"

"I suppose he felt he could not leave. The men are shy of the choke-damp, and the danger of a rush of water and other things. Some more have gone down to join him ; but if he were to come up, not a man of them would stop."

At this moment came an awful quaking of the ground beneath their feet, accompanied by a hollow rumbling which seemed to come from the heart of the earth. The words died on Marcia's lips. Every face grew white with terror. It was only the boy who found voice to cry aloud :

"That's another explosion !"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### ENTOMBED

THE carriage dashed along the road from Wold Hall to the pits—that road, as Marcia realised, that her husband's feet had trodden so many thousands of times, till every stock and stone so unfamiliar to her eyes must have been as friends to him. The awful doubt would thrust itself upon her: Was Marcus yet in the land of the living?

No one had suggested this doubt. Percival Eastlake had tried to reassure her. He had told her that it was quite possible this fresh explosion had taken place in a portion of the mine far distant from where the rescue party might be at work. He had tried to explain to her the possibility of pent-up gases driven along by some blast, or by the penning-in action of released water, freeing themselves in this fashion at some spot altogether different from the place of the original disaster. And she had listened eagerly, seeking to understand some of the technical terms he used, and aware that he spoke not without some expert knowledge; and yet a question was beating itself in upon her brain even whilst she

sought to give a confident answer to the words addressed her.

"Shall I ever see him again? Shall I ever see him again? Will he ever know? no, how can he know if he never comes back to me? that he had taught me what he said he would—when I did not believe it possible—that I love him—that I love him!"

She spoke those words again and yet again silently to herself. She lay back, white and passive, in the carriage, the others not venturing to speak their thoughts aloud, wondering with a great wonder how it was with her, but conscious that something was passing within her spirit as to the nature of which they could only hazard a guess.

"Does she indeed care for him—like that?" Ennisvale asked of himself. "I had never thought of Marcia as a woman easily won. She married, as all girls in our world marry, when the suitable man appears, and the match is arranged for them. Once I thought Marcia would be different, somehow. She refused to question him at my bidding. Was that a sign of her trust in him? I never thought of it in that light. Jove! I believe she has fallen in love with her own husband. It would be all in a piece with her character."

And Ennisvale, with a quickened and awakened interest, gazed mutely into his sister's face, wondering how, indeed, it was with her, and how it fared with that man of iron will and dauntless courage, who was adventuring himself into dire peril, and who

might even now be paying the penalty of his own temerity.

"Suppose she is made a widow by this day's work!"

A week ago—nay, even a day ago—Ennisvale would have regarded this consummation with comparative complacency. He would have said to himself that, after all, though it was a sad thing for a life to be cut short in such a fashion, yet Marcia's position would not be an unenviable one. She would be left an extremely wealthy widow, with all her life before her still, and an assured position which would make her a power in their world. So, Ennisvale was conscious, he would have regarded Marcia's possible widowhood a very brief time ago. How was it he could not so regard it now? How was it that his own anxiety seemed to burn like fire within him, and that whilst he sought to impress upon his sister the most hopeful aspect of the case as represented by Percival, he was all the while conscious of a gnawing anxiety and overshadowing horror, which would not be driven away or appeased?

He had parted from Marcus in anger—or in something which only the strong man's great forbearance had prevented breaking into open hostility. Even now he did not know the rights of the case. A few hurried, whispered words from Leslie, a few low-toned phrases from Percival at her instigation, had told him that he had made a great mistake in some of the things he had

suspected of his brother-in-law. Ennisvale, though hot of temper, was generous almost to a fault; and if he had wronged a person even in thought, he was passionately eager to make atonement by any means in his power. The fact that Marcus was playing the part of a hero now, at this moment, and was deliberately risking his life at the call of duty and humanity, to save the lives of men who, by all accounts, had been giving him no small trouble of late, all served to rouse Ennisvale's admiration and remorse. If such a thing should happen as that he should never be able to unsay to Marcus the bitter words he had spoken, he felt that he would carry with him all his days a burden of regret.

And now they were nearing the pits. The scene there was one which beggars description. The carriage halted at some distance, and Marcia, as one walking in a dream, descended, and mechanically took her brother's arm as he moved forward.

A thick, choking vapour was pouring out of one of the shafts. The air was rent by the frantic weeping of women and the cries of affrighted children. There was a clamour of men's voices, in which there seemed no dominant note of command. Marcia instinctively strained her ears for the sound of the voice she had heard before, although she almost knew she could not hear it. The chance that he had come up was almost too remote to be cherished. It was plain from the wild

excitement and horror everywhere prevalent that this new disaster had taken place in no remote gallery, as Percival had hoped. Women would not be shrieking and wringing their hands if no lives were in danger. And where the danger was the most threatening, there, as Marcia knew, would her husband be.

The crowd parted to admit the passage of Fergus, the foreman, who had seen the approach of the carriage, and now came forward with a face lined with care and strained with anxiety.

Marcia met him face to face, and her white lips parted as though to put a question which her voice had no power to utter. But he understood without any words that which she would ask. He was a plain-spoken northcountryman, and he did not keep her in suspense.

"He is down there. Another explosion has occurred. It is what we always fear when there has been one. It is less severe than the first. The engine is not disabled—as you hear. But it is impossible to make any descent into the shaft as yet. It would be death to attempt it."

"And is death already to those below," spoke Marcia, as one who regards some awful tragedy in a dream, and is calm from the very sense of unreality.

"I'll not be just saying that," spoke the manager. "There's always the chance of escape. You never know what the gases will be doing, nor the course they take. You never know how the fall of rock

will act. It may be that it'll just be the saving of them below, cutting them off for a while, but keeping them safe from the smother and reek. That's what we'll be finding out so soon as anyone can go down."

"Will they dare to go down—without my husband?" asked Marcia, in the same low, level tones.

"We'll just see that they do. I'll take them down myself," answered the foreman, with a grim smile. "If they've the heart of a man amongst them they'll not hold back, seeing as it's the only chance for the master's life—him that has risked his twice over for them, as you may say."


"I will go with you when you go!" spoke Marcia quietly.

He looked at her in unbounded admiration.

"I'll be telling that word to the boys in just a minute," he said, whilst a broad smile irradiated his face. "If that doesn't turn every mother's son amongst them into a volunteer, well, my name's not Jim Fergus!"

As he was about to move away from them, back into that surging, excited crowd, Marcia laid a hand upon his arm.

"Let me go with you," she said. "I must be near the heart of things. I must be where I can be ready to act when the time comes. You have an office, have you not, close to the mouth of the great shaft? Take me there. I will not be in your way. But I must be where I know what is going on."





For a moment he looked at her in dismay. She was so daintily dressed. She looked so curiously remote from her surroundings—so utterly unfitted to take part in any of those scenes which he foresaw as only too likely to be enacted during the next hours. But as the expression of her face and its meaning penetrated to his shrewd, if not very acute, understanding, his aspect changed, and by the time she had ended speaking, his mind seemed made up.

“I’ll be proud and glad to make you welcome there, my lady, with your friends, if they will honour us so far. You can be private in there, save for a certain coming and going; and I’ll be doing what I can to organise the rescue party, so soon as we can get down the shaft. It’ll hearten them all up to see you there—waiting for your husband, as the women are waiting for theirs—poor souls! It’s not so very many that are down—Heaven be thanked for that! just some half of the first lot, and then those who were down with the master. We’ll soon be hearing if any of them are alive and shut up. They’ll be knocking to let us know where they are. We know that some of the first lot were knocking; but this second blast may have released them—or it may have buried the others. There’s no guessing what has been done till we can get down. But there’s never any need to make up one’s mind to the worst.”

To the uninitiated there was something grimly terrible in the very hopefulness of the foreman’s

tone. He spoke of death or incarceration with such fearsome familiarity, as matters which to him had become part and parcel of the daily risks incident to the life of the place. As a matter of fact, at "Drummond's Pits," as they were locally called, serious accidents had been extremely rare, mainly, perhaps, owing to the personal supervision exercised by Marcus in every department. But Fergus had served his apprenticeship in other collieries, where misadventure had been far more common; and for this very reason he was able to cope with the present situation with confidence and courage.

He led the way back to the office, the crowd parting to admit them, and sending up a faint, wavering cheer as they heard that Lady Marcia had come to remain on the spot till they could get news from below.

To Marcia it was all like part and parcel of some terrible dream. There was hurrying to and fro; rough voices called out to each other unintelligible orders. The engine throbbed and pulsed, till it seemed to Marcia that her very being was in some way assimilated into that mechanical thud, which was like the united action of a thousand human hearts beating in unison in one long-drawn agony of apprehension and suspense.

Suddenly there was more active stir and movement round the shaft. Ennisvale, from his station at the window, suddenly exclaimed :

"The cage is up—they must be going down !"



And the next instant Marcia had flown to the door and thrown it open.

The foreman had been in once or twice to report progress as to the clearing of the shaft of foul exudations which made descent impossible ; but now he was in the midst of an excited mob of men, and Marcia heard him exclaim :

"Then 'tis a woman as will be shaming the manhood of ye all. For Lady Marcia herself, if I would let her, would go down the shaft after her husband."

The next instant his jaw dropped, for a voice clear as crystal, and with the ring of a silver bell, spoke almost at his elbow :

"I am going down whether you let me or not, Mr. Fergus. And my brother is going with me. If none else will accompany us, we will go alone."

That was enough. The words had fallen upon the ears of a hushed and wondering crowd. Scarcely had she spoken before a shout went up that was heard far and wide over the lonely fells. A hundred smutty hands were outstretched as though to protect the fair woman who had volunteered for this mission of peril, or to claim the right to go in her place. The cage was filled as by magic. Marcia found no place there. She touched one brawny miner on the shoulder, and said :

"Will you give me your place? My husband is below. I must go to him."

But rough fellow as he was, he took her hand and reverently kissed it, whilst he said in his uncouth

dialect, softened by the choke of tears—tears which stood in his eyes:

“Noa, my lady, I canna do that. ’Tis no place for wimmenfolk. We doan’t let our own lasses down the pits—not times like these. But if your man’s alive, we’ll have him back to you as soon as may be. You may trust us for that.”

Fergus sprang to his place; the cage sank out of sight; and to the sound of gusts of cheering, intermingled with sobs and tears of women, Ennisvale led Marcia back to the office.

Oh, that terrible time of waiting! It was like one unspeakable dream of darkness to Marcia. She sank down upon the hard office chair, buried her face in her hands, and remained lost to all external impressions. Leslie, white-faced and unspeakably anxious, wandered restlessly to and fro through the room, whilst the men spoke in undertones with each other, and went backwards and forwards for news, Percival’s familiarity with the spot making him the best substitute for the foreman during his absence.

How the time passed they never knew. But at last Percival, after a longer interval than usual, returned, and by his face Leslie saw instantly that he came with tidings.

“They have established communication with them. They have found out where they are. Marcus and some ten men are shut up in the mine—all living. Three dead are with them. They have water and a few candles. Gangs for breaking

down or blasting the partition walls are being organised this moment."

Marcia looked up with wild, haggard eyes, and uttered one word with whitening lips :

"Entombed !"

## CHAPTER XXV

### AN APPARITION

AN awful silence followed the utterance of that one fateful word—a silence which seemed as though it might almost be felt. It reached, or appeared to do so, to the crowd without; for the continuous murmur of voices and trampling of feet which had been so persistent and continuous was for the moment hushed. Nothing but the throb of the engine penetrated that little room, and it was only after the space of two full minutes that a wailing cry detached itself as it were from the heavy, ominous silence of woe, and rose shrilling into the gathering dusk with a note of direful human heart-break.

At that sound Leslie gave way, and broke into convulsive weeping. Marcia still stood like one turned to stone. Her brother would have been glad to see tears in her eyes; but there were none. A strange calm seemed to have fallen upon her. Was it the calm of despair?

At that moment, before any person had ventured to speak again, the door was flung suddenly open, and a woman swept in, wide-eyed and white-cheeked, and gazing round a moment in bewilderment, for it

was very dim in that small unlighted room, where none had cared to kindle a lamp. But two out of the four persons assembled there recognised her instantly, and Percival exclaimed:

"Ruth Raleigh! Surely it is Ruth!"

"Ah—is that you?" she exclaimed, in her deep, musical tones, which had struck Leslie so much upon their first meeting. "I have come for news of my father! They laugh me to scorn out yonder—the men—when I tell them he is down the shaft. But I know it—I know it. The boy saw him go—before the second explosion. May Heaven pardon him if that second explosion be not his own crafty handiwork!—or pardon me if I thus accuse him without cause!"

In the deep silence which followed, Marcia came forward and laid a hand upon the woman's arm.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Ebenezer's daughter, my lady—the sister of Luke Raleigh, who met his death beneath the roof of Wold Hall. Ever since that day my father's heart has been turned from me, because I have sought to convince him of that of which he would never be convinced. As well talk to the wild winds sweeping over the fells as to him. Blood had been shed—or so he believed—and blood for blood has been his cry ever since. I have watched over him. I have stayed his hand many times ere this. I have prayed him upon bended knee to turn aside from his hatred, to believe me when I assured him on my Bible oath that Marcus Drummond never lifted hand

against Luke. I could not prove my words. Woe is me that once I had deceived him! I had cut the ground from beneath my own feet. My tongue was tied. I could but protest, and he believed me not. And now, after long waiting, long watching, the deed is done. He has struck—and struck hard. Is he overwhelmed in his own destruction? Has aught been heard of him since?”

It was Percival alone who attempted to reply.

“I will find that out for you if I can. There is a code of signals,” he added to Marcia, “understood between your husband and Fergus. By means of it simple questions can be asked and answered: If I can ascertain the truth of this, I shall be relieved. I will go and see what news I can bring you.”

Marcia looked at him with the fixed gaze of the sleep-walker.

“If you can communicate with Marcus, tell him that I am here—waiting—praying for his release.”

Percival went out. Ennisvale approached her and said :

“Marcia, you must now know and believe that everything which is possible is being done. Will you not go home, and take Leslie with you? You can do nothing by waiting here. I will stay, if you wish, and bring you word later. But news must perforce be slow. We must possess our souls in patience. And you ought to be at home. Marcus would wish it.”

At that name her face just quivered.



"I will wait here till Mr. Eastlake returns, and then I will go to Wold Hall—"

"Falconer's Hall is your home. Will you not go thither, Marcia? It is the right place for you."

"It is not the right place. My place is to be near my husband—to be the first to meet and greet him on his return. I must be where I can gain news every hour—where I am in touch with that terrible work of peril which is now going on beneath our feet. Shall I lie soft on a bed of down—shall I feast myself on dainty meats, whilst Marcus—" She suddenly put her hands before her eyes, as though to strive and shut out the terrible vision which her vivid imagination called up. Then she threw them out as suddenly, crying out with the first break-down of her self-control since the terrible news had been made known: "Oh, I cannot bear it!—I cannot bear it!"

Strange to say, it was neither Ennisvale nor Leslie who approached her with words of consolation. Truth to tell, the long strain and the long fast had told upon them both. Leslie had some ado to restrain her tears or to maintain command of herself, whilst Ennisvale was looking white and shaken, and was almost unnerved by the sight of Marcia's white despair. It was Ruth Raleigh who stepped forward and took the ice-cold hands in a warm human clasp.

"Do not give way, my lady," she said, in full, mellow tones; "believe me, there is not always the suffering which we poor women picture. I have seen many who have been through it—imprisonment for

long hours—perhaps days in the black darkness. They say that when they hear their fellows working towards them, and when they have water to drink and some comrades to talk to, the time passes somehow better than one would guess. A gentleman once explained something to me too hard for me to understand; but it helped to make it plainer. It's something about compressed air in the cuttings, how it somehow seems to help them to get along for a great while without food. The master is down there with the men. If any can hearten them up 'tis he, and his lion heart will never fail him."

Marcia's eyes were wide with a mixture of emotions.

"But I thought—I thought that my husband was unpopular—"

"Never believe a word of that!" cried Ruth Raleigh, with strange vehemence; "'tis but the evil tongues at work which have stirred up strife, and worked like an evil leaven through the place. May God forgive him that set this evil afloat! I tell you, my lady, that the men all know who is their best friend. If you were to go through the place now, you would learn that for yourself. If aught of hurt befel the master, they may whistle for such another, and they know it. They know that Sir Robert has given up all concern in the pits. If any ill befel Mr. Drummond, the property would pass to other purchasers; and their faces gather blackness and dismay at the very thought."

Marcia clung to this strong woman's hands as

Ruth talked in her clear, full tones, and clinging to her thus, she said :

"You must come back with me to Wold Hall—you and your little son. It is nearer than your home, and you want to be near."

"Ah, do come!" pleaded Leslie, with sudden vehemence; "we shall feel so strange there alone, and not one of the maids will come near the place. The old woman will do her best. But you know the house. It will be such a comfort to have you."

"I will come with pleasure, my lady, if I may wait on you and serve you," answered Ruth, with a curious ring of passionate devotion in her voice. "There is none that know what Mr. Marcus has been to me and done for me. I would serve him with my heart's blood if I could!"

"Help Lady Marcia through this time of waiting," spoke Leslie, in a low voice, "and you will be doing Mr. Drummond the greatest service he could ask of you."

"I well believe it, ma'am," answered Ruth Raleigh, in a low, intense voice; "for well do I know how deep and true is the love which he cherishes in his great heart for his beautiful lady wife!"

Marcia suddenly started, and gazed wide-eyed at Ruth.

"You know that—that he loves me? How?"

A strange question from the reserved and proudly indifferent Marcia of past days; but in moments such as these the sword pierces through the very

joints and marrow, and the secrets of many hearts are thus revealed. Ruth answered very simply :

"He has loved you ever since he was a boy, my lady. He made a sketch of your face—he has a gift that way—when he came from abroad many long years since, and hung it up in his room at Wold Hall. It is there still. I will show it you. I asked him once who it was, and though he was not yet seventeen, he answered, 'It is my wife.' 'Why, Master Marcus,' I said, 'tis but a slip of a child.' 'It is the wife I am going to marry when she is a woman,' he said ; and the light came into his brown eyes that made me certain sure he would do it. I'd almost forgot all about it till one day in the spring. He came to me then with a picture in his hands. 'Twas his own work again. I knew the face, though all else was so changed. 'That is my wife, Ruth,' said he, with the same light in his eyes. 'She will be my wife within a month from to-day.' And when I heard the ring in his voice, and saw the look in his eyes, then I knew, and have known ever since, that he had won the love of his heart—as such a one as he deserves to do."

Marcia could have listened for ever. For the moment her fears and cares were swallowed up and forgotten in curious pulsating waves of mysterious joy. The stony expression had left her face ; the marble had warmed to life, and a proud gladness shone out of her beautiful eyes.

But at that moment Percival returned, his face

grave and serious. Addressing himself first to Ruth Raleigh, he said :

"It is known that your father is down the shaft, and that he is one of the injured. The master found him overcome by choke-damp, and carried him into safety, just prior to that last fall of the gallery wall which has hemmed them all in. More than this I cannot tell you. Lady Marcia, I assure you that everything possible is being done. Many hours must elapse before we can learn how the work of rescue progresses. It is not possible for you to remain longer here. Will you not return at least to Wold Hall? I myself will remain here and bring you the latest news."

"Not so," answered Marcia gently; "you will return with us. You look sadly fatigued and exhausted as it is. You must not attempt anything beyond the walk back to-day. There will be plenty of messengers to bring us tidings, if indeed anything should occur of which we should be advised."

There was no doubt about that. As Marcia emerged from the office, leaning on her brother's arm, the flaring lights round the shaft fell full upon them, and the thinning crowd hovering all around the place—picturesque Rembrandt-like groups, with the smoking red light shining upon blackened faces and ever-shifting combinations—the people set up a shout that simulated a cheer; and as she passed by, speaking kindly words of thanks and sympathy, rough voices called to her out of the gloom not to be afraid

—that she should have her man back safe and sound if they all died for it, and that they'd send the swiftest messenger they had to the Hall so soon as there was any news to tell.

Oh, that strange, unthinkable, impossible night, and that stranger day which followed! It was perhaps not amiss for Marcia that Percival Eastlake on his arrival at Wold Hall was discovered to be in a state of exhaustion verging on collapse. He had been making steady progress towards convalescence of late; but this strain had tried him beyond what he was able to bear. The next day he was unable to quit the couch upon which he had passed the night, and Leslie insisted upon fetching up the lonely little child from The Den, to come and cheer them by her presence, understanding well that the grim gloom of Wold Hall would be far less trying to her than the loneliness of The Den without Percival's presence there.

Ruth Raleigh was their chiefest stay and support. There was nothing which she could not do; and before the day had grown old, they had another assistant in the person of Rebecca Dugdale, who, hearing rumours of what was passing, came to offer her services. Her brother, Ruth's father, was now known by all the place to be down the shaft, imprisoned with the man against whom he had so often vowed vengeance. It was being stealthily whispered on all sides that the explosions had in all probability been both plotted and perpetrated by old Ebenezer, though in what way and by what means at present remained a mystery.

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By dusk of the second day Marcia could stand it no longer. Convinced from her brother's manner that something was being withheld from her, she resolved to inquire for herself, and stole forth alone, without a word to any. She turned her steps towards the pits, but had not proceeded very far before she found herself unaccountably tired and giddy. A low wall with some stones piled against it gave her a resting-place. She sank down, and closed her eyes, for a moment losing consciousness of her surroundings. When she was aware of these again, steps were approaching her on the other side of the wall. It was growing dim and dusk, though the hour was not late. She did not see the speakers, nor they her.

"The water's rising on them, poor souls!" said one. "It's just a race whether they can be rescued afore they're drowned dead, or perished with the icy chill. If it weren't for that, they might have held out—it's wonderful how they do; but there's no standing against the rise of water, and any minute the trickle might become a flood, and it would be all over in a winking. God save their souls!"

Marcia sat horror-stricken and paralysed. She could not move hand or foot till all sound of speech had died away, and then she arose and sped out into the dimness of the fells, like a hunted creature who knows not whither it flies.

She knew not where she went, nor what her purpose was—only that Marcus was dying by inches, locked in the recesses of those awful coal-black

abysses, and that she was powerless to reach him ; and a few minutes later she tripped and fell. She heard steps stumbling over some unevenness in the ground, and a voice was heard uttering a swift ejaculation—a voice she knew—deep, resonant.

She sprang to her feet and wheeled about. He was coming striding towards her—a towering figure against the faintly luminous October sunset—tall, massive, square-shouldered, the fading light just showing up the bronze tint of his hair and the red-brown lights in his eyes. She gasped ; her sight grew dim. She held out wavering hands, faltering out the one word :

“ Marcus ! ”



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY

A VOICE spoke to her out of the encircling mists.

"Not Marcus," it said, in accents so like his own that her heart leaped and thrilled at the sound, and the mist-wreaths seemed to clear away, "but Marcus's double, if you will, who has wrought him mischief enough in the past, but who is probably the only man alive at this present juncture who can get him out of this devil's kitchen in which he has buried himself."

Again came that leap at heart, this time shot through with a thrill of wild hope.

"You can help him—you can reach him? Oh, how?"

The strong man had hold of her hands by this time, for she was shaking from head to foot as though she would have fallen. In the dim light he gazed into her face, and she into his. She could almost have believed it to be her husband, and yet—and yet—yes, now that she saw him closer, there was a difference. This man was brawnier, rougher-looking, fiercer of aspect. He might be a trifle broader in his proportions; certainly in his rough

pilot coat he appeared so. It was like a travel-stained Marcus, as he might look when fresh from some long voyage, or when presently emerging from the mine, if his frame were not shrunken by privation. But the likeness was enough to fill her with something besides astonishment. It engendered an immediate sense of intimacy. And he exclaimed as he gazed at her :

“Well, you are a beauty, and no mistake !”

She did not shrink away from him. She looked fearlessly up into his eyes, and said :

“I am Marcus’s wife !”

“Good !” he said. “Then you are the lady I have mainly come to see. But my business with you can wait. We have first got to get Marcus out of this mess. I’ve got a notion in my head, and if I’m right, we’ll have the whole lot of poor devils free before dawn to-morrow morning.”

“Who are you ?” asked Marcia, shivering all over ; for it seemed to her almost as though some genius of the fells, in shape like to her husband, had appeared at this juncture to work a miracle of salvation. And she almost feared it was some wild, fevered dream from which she would presently wake to find herself confronted by tidings that all was over—all was lost.

“I am Tom Drummond—a scapegrace cousin of Marcus’s, whose name I suppose you have never heard, whose identity you have never suspected. I’ll tell you my story another time. Marcus has played scapegoat for my sins long enough. If he had told me before what was being rumoured, I’d have come

sooner. I'll face the thing out now. It would have been better to have done it at the time. I see that now ; but I was a wild fool in those days, and I got a scare that night—"

"The night that Luke Raleigh was—was—"

"The night he lost his all to me, quarrelled with me, provoked me to strike him—and presently died suddenly of heart disease. I did not murder him. That can be proved. But it might have been brought in manslaughter. I was afraid. Ruth was afraid. I was to have married her—when I could show my face to the world. So I made tracks and fled. I got a scare, though, and I've been pulling round ever since. I've not come back this time like the prodigal son as regards circumstances, though I'll own up to as much shame for the past as you like to saddle me with. If I'd heard before that things were going cussed with Marcus, I'd have come earlier ; but I've been lying low this last bit, thinking I'd not let anybody know my whereabouts till I'd a decent record to show. So Marcus couldn't write till just latterly ; and then he wished to know if I objected to his sharing his secret with his wife. He'd made me a promise to keep it, unless absolutely obliged by circumstances to reveal it. Eastlake wrote too—Marcus sent the letter ; I guessed there was something up, and I settled to come home and see what it all meant. I've been a *pukkah* fool, if you like, and a scapegrace as bad as they make 'em over here ; but I think I'm not altogether a coward. Anyhow, here I am to face it out, whatever it may

be. And the first news I heard on getting out of the train was this confounded explosion, and that Marcus was entombed. I hadn't meant to show up at the pits, I'm a bit too like him; but luckily in the dark, with my collar turned up and my hat pulled down, nobody noticed that. I disguised my voice, and had a long talk with an old pit hand I knew by sight. He knows the workings better than any man alive, except perhaps Marcus. He showed me on the plan we made in the sand just where they are shut up; and then suddenly it flashed in upon me that I knew a trick worth two of their picking and blasting, and if I'm right, we'll have them out before the sun rises to-morrow."

All the while that the man was talking he was walking rapidly over the uneven ground, holding Marcia fast by the arm to support her wavering steps. A strange weakness was upon her, yet mingling with and dominating it a strange and bewildering joy. Hope had suddenly entered her heart. He had come to save Marcus—he would be able to reach him by some fashion unknown to others. They were on their way, in a sense, to him already, she judged. She asked no more.

The young moon had now risen in the sky, casting weird lights over the waste of rocky fell they were traversing. At length they reached a curious spot that Marcia certainly had never seen before—or its like. A great opening, like a gash in the side of the hill, yawned before them. It was partly masked by great clumps of gorse bushes and masses of

brambles. Tom Drummond plunged through the thorny growth, half lifting Marcia after him. She found herself in a cavern-like place, which was illumined by the ray of the match struck by her companion ; and when he had lighted a little bull's-eye lantern which he had taken from his pocket, she saw that a narrow tunnel seemed to be driving downwards as though into the very heart of the earth from this cavern-like place above. Along this tunnel they hastened, trending ever downwards, and downwards, till after what seemed an enormous time to Marcia, they reached another wide opening, like another cavern, and all trace of further passage was then lost.

"Ha !—here we are !" spoke Marcia's guide, as he deposited his lantern on the ground, and began passing his hand over a certain portion of the rocky surface of the wall. Marcia watched him intently. She heard him utter an exclamation of satisfaction, and next he seized the lantern, and pushed it bodily into a large round cavity about on the level of his own head.

From this cavity he pulled out some big stones, upon which he afterwards stood, and thrusting his head within the aperture, he suddenly gave vent to a wild cry or call—so peculiar and so piercing that Marcia instinctively put up her hands to her ears, though the next minute she dropped them to her sides ; for her guide was motioning to her to come closer, and reached forth a hand to draw her up to his own level.

"Now listen!" he cried, as imperiously as Marcus himself could have spoken—"listen with all your ears!"

Far, far away—down, as it seemed, in the very heart of the earth—that wild, peculiar cry was repeated. It could not be an echo. It came too late—it was too complete. It was another human voice answering out of the prison-house. And the voice was the voice of Marcus!

Tom Drummond smote his palms together, and the light of triumph was in his eyes.

"I knew it! I knew it! I was certain from the first; but this makes assurance doubly sure."

He put his head into the hole once more, and repeated that same peculiar and piercing call. Again it was answered; and this time it seemed as though the answering voice were somewhat nearer and stronger. Marcia thrilled through every fibre of her being.

Gathering together all the breath in his mighty lungs, Tom Drummond shouted articulate words this time.

"Marcus! Is that you? I am Tom! I have come back! I will have you out within twelve hours—probably within eight! Can you hold out?"

Drawing back his head, he looked at Marcia and said:

"He says yes—but the water is coming in faster. There is no time to lose. I must go for instant help, now that we know where they are. You had better come with me."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Less than an hour, I hope. I shall be back by that time, anyhow, and the gang will not be long after me."

"Will the light last that time? Can you leave it with me?"

"Bless my soul! you don't want to stay here, Lady Marcia?"

"I should like to be near my husband. Could I speak with him?"

"I don't know if you could make your voice reach him. I'll tell him to come up as near as he can to the whispering hole, as we called it once—though the shouting hole would be the better word. Perhaps then you could make him hear. But I don't like to leave you, though the lamp will burn on all right."

"I would rather stay," she answered; "at least, if I can speak with my husband."

Tom used his lungs to good purpose. He seemed to know more about the curious acoustic properties of this subterranean place than Marcus; for he shouted directions to him which appeared to be understood and complied with, for his final words were:

"Your wife is here. She wishes to speak to you. I am off for help. It will not be long in coming now. Tell the boys so, and keep up your pecker. Trust scrapegrace Tom to find a way out of this hobble, as you've found so many for him in days of yore!"

Then Marcia felt herself hoisted up to a position which commanded this dark aperture, and she heard her companion stumbling hurriedly away in the dark, leaving her to her extraordinary vigil in the heart of the hill alone.

Then a voice seemed to reach her from a great distance.

"Marcia! Is it possible that you are there?"

She choked back the sob in her throat, and lifted her voice till it rose clear and full.

"I am here, Marcus! Oh, Marcus, Marcus, tell me—how is it with you?"

"Why, well," he answered, "if release comes soon. Strong men can fast longer than you would guess, perhaps, without suffering more than passing inconvenience. Most of them are holding out well. We have water—we shall have too much of that in time; and I had stuffed a box or two of meat lozenges, which I always keep for emergencies, into my pockets before we went down. We are not in *extremis*, Marcia. But what are you doing there?"

"Waiting for Tom to come back with a rescue gang."

"Are you alone?"

"No—I am with you—now."

His next words she did not hear. They seemed of the nature of an exclamation. She clasped her hands closely together. A strange light was in her eyes as the dim gleam of the lantern fell upon them. Again her voice rose clear and bell-like:

"Marcus!"



"Yes!"

"Can anyone else where you are hear what I say?"

"No one. They are in a different cutting, where it is drier."

She drew her breath hard for a few moments; the colour came and went in her face. Then she spoke again:

"Marcus—I love you!"

That was all—those four words, containing a whole life-history within their compass. The effort of speaking them turned her giddy. She reeled, and almost fell, so that his response was lost. She heard not the words, only the thrill of joy and triumph with which they sounded even through that hollow distance. She buried her face in her hands, and stood quaking like an aspen tree, shaken by the storm of her own overpowering emotion.

"Marcia!—are you there?"

The words seemed to come from a great distance. She hastily climbed up to her post of vantage once more.

"Yes, Marcus—I am here!"

"I want to tell you, Marcia—I want you to know—whatever happens now, I am content. What you have told me has taken the sting even from death."

"You must not die, Marcus; you must live—for my sake!"

"I will!" he answered, and she recognised the old imperious note in his voice—"if it be possible."

"Tom will do it—your cousin. He is so like you,

Marcus. I cannot believe that he will fail. I shall watch till he comes back. Then I shall watch till the thing is done. I shall be here all the while. I shall be near you."

"You ought to be at home, my dearest."

It was the first such term of endearment which he had ever offered her. She thrilled at the sound.

"Home is where you are, Marcus. I have learned that at last!"

At that moment a new sound broke the stillness of her retreat. It was the sound of footsteps; yet it could not be Tom returning already—there would not have been time. Moreover, the tread was not heavy or certain enough for his. A gleam of light fell upon the wall of the tunnel opposite. Marcia sprang down to see who the intruder could be, then uttered a cry of joy.

"Ruth!"

The woman's face was transfigured; her eyes were aglow as with some great inarticulate rapture. At sight of Marcia she sprang forward with a cry.

"He sent me to you! Tom!—he has come back! Oh, forgive us for the deception we practised! It was to shield him; and Marcus Drummond bid us hold our peace! How dared I speak when it might have meant the pursuit and apprehension of the man I loved? He had been screened so often by Marcus—and no harm had come of it. It seemed as though no harm would come of this either. Yet often I lay awake on my bed at night wondering if we might not be doing wrong. I knew



that whispers were abroad against the young master for the 'goings on' at Wold Hall. But what could I do? I loved Tom. I was always assured that one day he would lay aside his wild ways and redeem the promises he was always making. I kept the secret. I kept it from my own father. His sight is good at a distance; but not close at hand. When he saw Tom, he always believed it was Marcus—and I let him believe. Later, when I sought to tell him the truth, he would not have a word of it: He told me I was lying to turn him from his purpose."

Marcia put her hands to her head. She was beginning to see light through the tangle of mystery.

"You mean that—that—there were two of them at Wold Hall? The things people whisper of were not Marcus—they were Tom?"

"That is so, my lady. But not above half-a-dozen souls in the place know it. When Tom first sought shelter here, he came as a fugitive. He was always a wild lad. Marcus took and hid and shielded him. That was how it began. By day he lay quiet indoors and slept. By night he would rove the fells, or gallop over them on Black Beelzebub, that few dared go near. Then he made a friend here and there—my poor brother for one—and would turn night into day at Wold Hall. They thought it too lonely and remote to be noticed; then somehow whispers got abroad. But those who saw him always believed

it to be the young master—a bit wild-looking from dissipation. But Marcus never touched card or dice-box. He always said he had other fish to fry. He worked early and late at the pits, and went to bed and slept the sleep of toil. I know now what it was that was the power which held him back ; it was the thought of your ladyship, and the love he bore to you ! ”

Marcia hid her face in her hands, and a little sob of pure happiness broke from her. Here in this wild, dim place, where she awaited with what patience she might the liberation of her husband, she tasted the keenest happiness of her life.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A STRANGE NIGHT

LESLIE became very uneasy when she discovered that Marcia was not in the house, nor in its vicinity; and when dusk began to fall, she sought the room where Ennisvale was sitting over the fire striving to amuse Sweetheart. Percival Eastlake lay upon the couch, much restored by this spell of bodily rest, yet consumed by anxiety and trouble for his friend.

"Marcia is out, and she does not come back. She said she must have a mouthful of air; but she promised not to go alone to the pits, and I do not think she would forget or break her word. She would never stay away so long as this without news. And she knows that news is always brought here direct. I am growing very uneasy about her."

Leslie was also conscience-stricken at having somewhat overlooked the flight of time. She had been talking with Rebecca Dugdale, and Rebecca had been telling her the whole story of Estelle Enderby, her wooing by Roland Eastlake,

and a variety of matters connected with both the brothers.

"Ruth saw her turn her steps out yonder," spoke Leslie, indicating the direction with pointing finger. "She has started off already to try and follow and find her."

"I will go with her!" cried Ennisvale, starting up and setting down the child in the vacated chair. "See here, Leslie, you get some hot tea all ready brewed, and have some yourself, and make things comfortable for Sweetheart and her Best Beloved. We can't expect much news from the pits to-night. It's horrible work this waiting; but it's got to be borne. Marcia must be warmed and fed when we get her, and put to bed willy-nilly. I don't believe she had her clothes off all last night. Anyway, she did not sleep a wink. It won't do to go on like that. They say it may be three days before— It's a horrible thing to contemplate; but men have been rescued living after nearly five days' entombment."

Ennisvale had left them even whilst speaking. He, too, was anxious for Marcia, and there was just light enough to follow the track which Leslie had indicated as having been taken by Ruth.

They had their tea together—these three. Percival came to the table, and Leslie sat behind the tea equipage; for there was no drawing-room at Wold Hall, and none of the little accessories of the modern afternoon tea. But Leslie found herself unexpectedly hungry. She had scarcely touched

food for the past four-and-twenty hours. When Percival's eyes met hers, his grave, pale face kindled to a smile, and he said in his gentle and comprehending way :

"Marcus has a frame of iron, and they were all picked men who went down with him. They can stand much more than you well understand without succumbing. But it is very hard to be waiting here helpless. It is at times like these that I feel shame at being such a useless log myself."

"You are not useless," flashed Leslie. "You helped Marcia more than anyone. You know so much. You can answer her questions. It is not muscle alone that helps in times like these. It is the feeling of strength behind."

He looked at her, and his eyes kindled. Did she indeed feel that he was of any use—that any such strength was his?

"You are his friend. You kept his secret. You let yourself be misjudged rather than betray it. Oh, yes, you are strong. I can feel that all through me. Men are like that; strong to bear, and strong to forgive!"

Her eyes flashed a sudden look at him. It was as though she asked pardon for previous misconception. He flushed beneath his pallor as he said :

"I have not yet been able to tell you all."

"I do not want to know what you do not tell me. Marcia was right. She judged wisely. She

would not ask—because she trusted Marcus. She knew he would have told her if it had been for her good, if there were need. Oh, she must be glad now that she gave him her trust. Is not trust indissolubly linked with love?”

She was thinking of Marcia when she spoke—of Marcia alone; but when the sound of her own words came back to her, they came charged with a new meaning, and her face suddenly flamed.

At that moment Sweetheart's voice broke in upon the pulsating silence. She had turned from the fire, and was studying them as they sat opposite to each other at the table.

“Oh, Best Beloved, doesn't it look just as if you and Pretty Mamma were married to one another? Isn't it just like husband and wife, sitting and talking like that? Do you feel as though you were married?”

Leslie jumped up and caught the child, so as to conceal her hot face in the tangle of golden curls.

“Let's go to the door, and watch if we can see anybody coming. And where is little Mark all this while? Is he getting his tea with Rebecca?”

“I expect Mark is out yonder—at the pits,” answered the child. “He's always out somewheres.” And as they gazed out into the dark world, dimly illuminated by the brightening moon floating in a halo of curd-cloud tinged at the edge with opal,



Sweetheart suddenly exclaimed, pointing her finger: "There he is—there he is! He's coming here. He's running fast. It's little Mark, and he's coming here!"

Leslie saw him, and her heart began to throb. The sturdy boy was running as though he came charged with news. They heard his panting breath as he approached, telling of a long run and eager haste. Leslie ran bare-headed out to meet him, and drew him within the door, waiting perforce for him to get his breath to speak, and anxious that Percival should share the news, whatever it might be.

They were all in the lighted room together now. Mark caught his breath and began speaking.

"They sent me to tell you—Mammy Ruth and Lord Ennisvale and the big man like the master. He's come—Mammy Ruth called him 'Tom—Tom—Tom!'—and he put his arms round her and kissed her. Till he did that, I thought it was the master—or his boggart."

He broke down, panting; but Percival had sprung to his feet with eyes alight, and was beside the boy in a twinkling.

"Has Tom Drummond returned?" he cried. "Boy, are you dreaming? A tall, big man, like the master? Are you sure? Are you sure? You have not been dreaming?"

"I'm certain sure," answered the boy. "I was watching Mammy Ruth, and creeping behind her, lest she should spy me and send me back. I saw

the gentleman coming after her—Lord Ennisvale—but he was a long way behind. Then the moon shone out, and I saw the big man, and I nearly yelled, for I thought it was the ghost of the master. Then Mammy Ruth saw him too. She stopped and shrieked out. And he called to her, and then she ran to him, calling out his name, ‘Tom! Tom! Tom!’ And he got his arms round her, and they stood like that talking and talking; and then the gentleman got up, and they talked to him too; and I crept up and listened.”

Leslie’s eyes were wide with amaze. Percival’s pale face had flushed with excitement.

“At last!” he cried. “At last!”

But before Leslie could ask his meaning, the boy was off again:

“The big man was telling them—he knows all about the mine—that he can get at the place where the master is shut up from the outside. I know where he means—where the fell dips deep; but I didn’t know there was a hole in it, and a long, long passage leading down. But Mammy Ruth knew. She’d been there. Lady Marcia is there, and Mammy Ruth has gone to her. The big man and Lord Ennisvale have gone to the pits. They are going to bring men and blasting powder, and get them out from this end. They say they’ll do it before morning. The big man said it; and he spoke like the master. He’ll make the men believe in him—like as they believe the master. And they sent me

to tell you. I can show you the cave if you want to go."

Leslie was shaking from head to foot. Had the boy been dreaming out upon the wild fells till he knew not truth from his own imaginings? But Percival seemed to understand.

"Tom Drummond back—and at this crisis! It is like the hand of Fate, indeed—or of Providence, perhaps I should say. Yes, yes, I remember now. He and Marcus were always talking of the possibility of making an entrance into the mine from the fell lower down; though they never did it, and it was their secret. But the wonder of it all! Miss Moncrieff, will you be afraid to be left if I go out to see what all this means? I will come back and bring you word again."

"That will not be necessary. I shall go with you. Rebecca will take care of the child. I must go and learn what this thing means. It is like the wildest of dreams."

He could not stay her any more than she could stay him. Both were animated by an overmastering excitement. Personal fatigue was forgotten. There could be no thought in any mind until this mystery was elucidated—until they knew what there was to hope for, and what the night would bring forth.

They walked together over the moonlit fell, the boy flitting on ahead like a shadow. Then it was that Leslie asked:

"Who and what is this Tom Drummond—the man bearing Marcus's name, and apparently his

aspect also? Why have we never heard of him before?"

"There can be no reason now why I should not tell you all," answered Percival, as they moved along. "I hold that this reappearance absolves me from my pledge of silence. Tom Drummond is a first cousin to Marcus. His father was Sir Robert's only brother, and a ne'er-do-well. The son inherits something of the same temperament. Sir Robert pitied the boy, and though not wishful for close relations with him, sent him to school. For two years Marcus was at the same school, before he went to Eton. That was the one blunder Sir Robert made, for in those two years a strong friendship formed itself between the two boys, and when Marcus found that Tom was not to be permitted to visit him at home, the tenacity and determination which have always characterised him showed itself in the ingenuity with which the two lads managed to continue their friendship. Tom used to come here in secret, and live hidden away in some cave in the fell side. Marcus took him food, and to a great extent shared the hardy outdoor life of his comrade. The strong resemblance between the lads aided them. Marcus dressed him in his old clothes, and if he was ever seen, he was always mistaken for Marcus. These stolen visits were of course during the summer holidays. They grew less frequent as time passed. Tom was started in the world by his uncle, his father being now dead; but the wild strain kept cropping up, and he lost many chances, and led

an odd, roving life, at last wearing out his uncle's patience, so that he could not look to him any more. But by this time Marcus was growing to man's estate, and Marcus never failed him. They met in different places then, for Marcus was his own master. When Tom came here he took up his abode in a ruined cottage near to Hill Top Farm; and Ruth Raleigh was entrusted with the secret, and undertook to keep him supplied with food. On these occasions he was generally a fugitive through his own wildness and reckless conduct, anxious to lie low for a while, and then to start afresh elsewhere."

"And Marcus stood by him all through?"

"Yes, without wavering so far as material help went, though he spoke his mind with his characteristic frankness. Gradually I came to know something of the story. I tried to reason with Tom. We all did our best; but though he made many good resolutions, he never kept them long. There would be a new fiasco, and fresh flight; sometimes he would come here; more often Marcus went to him. And so things went on till Sir Robert and his wife left Wold Hall, and Marcus ruled there alone."

"Ah!" cried Leslie, "I begin to understand. It was not Marcus all that time—it was this Tom!"

"Exactly. Tom learnt what sort of *ménage* Marcus kept at Wold Hall: the two old servants, who were bound to his service body and soul, as you

may say. Marcus's word has been law to them. They never betrayed the secret of Tom's identity. He came and went almost at will. Ruth knew all—for by that time she and Tom were plighted lovers, and we hoped that this love, which was genuine enough, would do for Tom what friendship and our remonstrances never had. Luke knew also; he was swayed by Tom to an unimaginable extent; but others who came to play and drink, and turn night into day at Wold Hall, believed that Marcus was their host and entertainer. In those dim rooms, thick with tobacco reek, and with Tom dressed in Marcus's old clothes, the difference between the pair was hard enough to distinguish."

"But why did Marcus permit it?"

"To shelter Tom, who was generally in some sort of trouble, and to try and curb him, and to keep an eye on him. Marcus, conscious of his iron will, found it hard to realise that in Tom he had almost met his match. He dominated the other when they were together; but when released from the spell of Marcus's personality, there was no holding him. Still, with dogged resolution, Marcus held on his way. He considered that he had taken Tom under his protection, had in some sort made himself responsible for him; and nothing would induce him to turn back upon him. To keep the secret was imperative; for should Sir Robert suspect aught, there would be an end of Tom's chances. The parents heard rumours about Wold Hall. But they saw enough of Marcus, and the good work

he did at the pits, not to be seriously afraid for him. Then Tom was not always here. Often for months together he was away, suddenly returning from a wild spell of revelry, and vanishing again. At last came the night when Luke Raleigh lost his life. Marcus shall tell you that story one day. This sobered and scared Tom, and he fled, and we have known nothing of his whereabouts since. We thought it safer not. Had Marcus been committed for trial by the coroner's jury, then we must have spoken, and revealed all. As, however, his alibi was unimpeachable, he would not hear of any revelation being made. He swore us who knew to secrecy—and mystery has shrouded the events of that night ever since. That is the whole story, Miss Moncrieff; and now it seems that Tom Drummond is back once more, and that he will elucidate the mystery in his own way."

"Oh," cried Leslie, "I am glad—I am glad that Marcia trusted him. She was right—and we were wrong! She trusted him—and now she will have her reward." She turned suddenly upon Percival, and cried insistently: "They will be able to get them out in time—say that they will!"

"I trust and hope so!" he answered fervently. "If only our operations at this end do not release any volume of water which may do deadly work before we can reach them."

"You do not think it will?"

"I trust not. I only remember that in old days, when the boys talked together of private blasting

at this end, Marcus stopped short before they tried it, because some old pit hand had warned him that one never knew where water lay, and whether blasting would not bring flooding."

Leslie grew very white in the moonlight, and held her peace.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A GRIM, STERN FIGHT

ALL through the night the grim battle was waged—that awful fight for the lives of the few, sternly fought by the many on both sides of their living tomb—a fight which engraved itself in ineffaceable characters upon the hearts of strong men and devoted women, and which left there a mark that they carried to the end of their days.

Marcia was scarcely startled when Leslie and Percival, under the guidance of a small brown boy with a pine torch in his hand, suddenly invaded the solitude of the cave, now shared between her and Ruth Raleigh. For the moment she had thought it the rescue party, and had sprung forward, crying out:

“Make haste! Make haste! He does not speak to me now! His voice is silent. Oh, go to him! Break down these awful walls of separation! I must get to my husband!”

But before the wild words were well out of her lips, Leslie's warm arms were around her; and whilst Percival spoke apart with Ruth Raleigh, in

low, eager tones of the return of the wanderer, Leslie sought to sooth Marcia, and learn from her the cause of her terrible agitation and distress, so foreign to her wonted calm.

"Something awful is happening there," spoke Marcia, with dilated eyes; "I am sure of it—I am sure. I spoke to him. He spoke to me. It was as though he were a great way off. But I heard his voice. I heard it plain. But I have called to him since, and there is no answer. And yet he knows that I am here, waiting, watching, keeping vigil till they reach him—my husband, my love! Oh, Leslie, help me—help me! I cannot bear it—I cannot! They say the water is rising—the black, cruel water, drowning them, choking them! And they are in black darkness, and without food. Oh, my love—my love!"

She was shaking all over like an aspen. Leslie held her closer and ever closer, as though in that loving contact there must be some measure of consolation. She whispered softly in her ear:

"We must pray, Marcia—we must pray. It is all that is left to us. God can help them, if man cannot. You know the words—how do they run?—'Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord!'"

These words from the lips of the laughter-loving Leslie were not without effect upon Marcia. Her convulsive shuddering abated. She spoke in low, gentle tones:

"I know! I know! I have been praying. Oh,

how we have prayed, Ruth and I! Our *De Profundis* has indeed gone up. Leslie, if God hears prayer—and indeed, indeed, I will believe that, whatever else may fail—I think, ah, I must think that my husband will be given back to me!”

“Ah, yes; think it, believe it, hope it!” cried Leslie. “Oh, do not give way! Do not despair! Hark! I hear sounds! The men are coming. They will reach them, I am sure of it. It will not be all helpless waiting now. They will work, and we will help them. There are always things which women can do in such times as these.”

Leslie's ears had not deceived her. Tom Drummond, with two or three of the oldest and most experienced of the pit hands, together with the foreman and Ennisvale, were marching single file into the cavern, which was illumined now by many lanterns, and proved to be a place of some size and very irregular formation.

A confused medley of voices instantly filled the place. Tom was speaking rapidly and tersely, with an air of command so like to that of Marcus that Marcia held her breath to listen, noting how he swayed the men about him just as Marcus swayed them by his presence.

He was telling the story of how he and Marcus found the cave deep in the hill-side, and how they experimented as boys and lads, till they made out that the pit workings approached in one direction very near to this place.

Now the experts crowded together to listen, to examine for themselves, to seek to establish vocal communication with those below through air-holes, as they were supposed to be, which certainly connected the two places. But though Tom uttered his cry again and again—that curious call which had been from boyhood employed between the two comrades as their private signal—not a ghost of a response could they hear, and the square, resolute face clouded over with anxiety and dismay as this man realised that something had happened to Marcus. Either he had been forced to leave the spot where he could hear and answer the shouts of his friends, or else he was too exhausted to be able to shout back.

"We must dare all and risk all to get to them," spoke Tom at last. "You say, Fergus, that they cannot be reached under three more days of night and day toil by the men at the other side."

"That is what we reckon, at the present rate of progress," answered the foreman, whose black face and red-rimmed eyes betokened that he had known neither rest nor sleep ever since the catastrophe occurred. "Do as we will, the progress is slow—so few can work at a time, and the blasting operations have to be carried on with the extremest care, and only at intervals. Each one has been followed by a rise of the water where the men are. They have signalled that to us. It's terribly ticklish work. One is afraid to act and afraid to refrain. I'd give my right hand—"

"You're a good fellow!" cried Tom. "Marcus shall know that when we have him up. It's plain they can't hold out till rescue reaches them from that side. Something must be risked, and I'll take the responsibility upon my shoulders. I'm Marcus's near relation. I've told you that much, and you can see it for yourselves, though I'll tell you no more than that to-night. We've got to work, boys—to work like Trojans, every mother's son of us. You'll stand by me, I know; and if the thing can be done, we will do it!"

A ringing cheer went up. It filled that cavernous place with a multitude of echoes. Marcia thrilled from head to foot. She stepped forward from the shadows whither she had retired, and spoke aloud, scarce knowing what she did:

"Save my husband for me, men, and I will bless you to my life's end. You have wives yourselves at home. You know how a wife feels when her husband's life is at stake."

The men regarded her with respectful admiration.

"'Tis his bonny lady," they said one to another, "her as wanted to go down herself in the cage to hearten up the boys! She's worthy to be the master's wife, that she be. We'll have him out for her safe and sound—if so be as any can do it!"

More sounds of hurrying footfalls were heard. Little Mark was proudly showing the way into the cave to the blasting parties—gangs of great,

swarthy, smutty fellows, who were hurrying to this new spot, full of excitement and energy.

And now the time had come when the women must go, when all the space was needed for the active operations which must be quickly set on foot, and Leslie gripped Marcia firmly by the arm, saying in a low voice :

"We must do as we are told. We must go now. But we need not be idle nor useless. The workers will want spells of rest. Let us have refreshment ready for them too. We will brew strong coffee, or hot soup. We will have meat and bread and all they will need ready within that outer cave. We will toil too ; we need not idle away our time, or sit with folded hands. There is work for all of us, and to spare. You ought to be in bed, Marcia ; but I shall not send you there. You shall work your hardest this night, let the future bring what it may !"

And so that strange, long, terrible night closed in upon them.

From time to time a deep rumbling roar, accompanied by an oscillation of the ground, told the watchers above them that some blasting operation had taken place. Often smoke-grimed men, weary from excessive toil in the heated atmosphere, came up from the lower cave, grateful for the speedy refreshment administered to them by those awaiting them above.

It seemed a long time before Tom Drummond came to them. It was close upon two in the

morning before he appeared, and his face was bathed in sweat, and pale beneath its bronze by the magnitude of his exertions. His brow was furrowed by thought and care, though his eyes were full of fire and confidence.

Marcia, Leslie, and Percival were alone at that moment, Ruth and Rebecca, with Ennisvale, having returned to Wold Hall for fresh supplies. Marcia sprang forward, her unspoken question in her eyes. The big man looked at her and nodded, holding out his hand for a great cup of tea, which he drained to the last drop before he tried to speak.

"Thanks! My throat was like a lime-kiln. It's hot work, and no mistake. Yes, we're getting on. We are much nearer. We must be through in a couple of hours at least. But we can get no sign from them."

"You cannot make them hear, you mean?"

"They must hear, if they are where I think; and now and again we fancy we hear faint knockings. But we can't get any response to our signals. It looks a bit ugly that. I don't like it. That chap Fergus says that at the first they got regular code answers. He and Marcus had worked out a system for communicating by raps, and that's how they communicated with them at first. But it don't work now. We rap and rap, but no response comes. We'll have to see what that means later."

Marcia's face was deadly white. There was one explanation she could think of, and only one. A few hours ago her husband's voice had reached

her, clear and fairly strong. What had silenced it since?

"Is it water?" she asked heavily.

"That's what we can't tell. Old Barty, the knowingest old chap in the pits, thinks not. He declares that what we are doing would be more likely to release water and drain it off than increase it. I don't profess to follow his calculations. It's too long since I was down below. But Fergus agrees with him, if there's any consolation in that. Anyhow, we've got near enough to reach them before long, and we shall persevere to the end now. Dead or alive, we'll have them out by cock-crow."

Marcia covered her face with her hands, and shivered from head to foot. Dead or alive! Dead or alive! Awful alternative!

"I would just like to tell you the story of that night at Wold Hall, as I rest a spell, and before I bring Marcus up to you. It was like this. I've told you—or you've heard—how it began, and how I lived about here in secret at intervals, most of the good folks mistaking me for Marcus from first to last. It was this way that night. Luke Raleigh had come up to play with me. He'd lost to me a lot, and was bent on his revenge. We were good friends up to a certain point; but he was angry at his losses. I liked him the better because I wanted to marry his sister. She cared for me too; but Luke was against it, until I turned over a new leaf, and could come courting her openly. I wanted



her to make a runaway affair of it with me. But for Luke and the child, I'm not sure she wouldn't have consented. Well, we played deep that night, and I won still. He got mad and reckless. I staked him for Ruth—I mean, I staked him either his money back if he won, or if he lost, that he forebore to oppose me about Ruth. He agreed, and we played. I won again. He was rather the worse for liquor. He was angry, and accused me of cheating. He came over towards me furiously. He struck the first blow. I struck back—and he fell, hitting his head and cutting it open. But he got up in a dazed way, and sat down. I rushed out to get water or a towel, or something to bind it up, and met Ruth coming hastily along the passage, having heard the sound of strife. She had come to Wold Hall to try to take her brother away. She came in, and we bound up his head after a fashion; and Ruth went away at my bidding. I did not like her to be too much mixed up with these doings.

“I did not think Luke would be fit to go home that night. I went to see if Marcus's bed was ready—Marcus was at Falconer's Hall that night. It was, and I came back to tell Luke, when I heard a groan and a fall. I rushed in. He had torn the bandage from his head, had flung it into the fire, and was lying face downwards upon the floor—dying. He was dead, I believe, before I reached him. He had told me once that his heart was queer; but I had never thought of his going off

like that. I was frightened. I saw what aspect the thing might wear. I never touched him, after making certain he was dead ; but I slipped out of the house, and across to Eastlake's, and I hid in his house for that night and the next day. Then I made tracks. Marcus had come to me, and we settled it all. He was almost more anxious than I was that the thing should remain a secret—my stolen visits—my personation of him in the neighbourhood. His alibi, he declared, was enough to secure him from suspicion. I took him at his word, and I took his gold. I sailed for America forthwith, and sought to start afresh with a better record. This time I have succeeded. I can look the world in the face again. I have come here to set matters right for Marcus. I had better have stayed and faced it out at the time, seeing that Ruth saw her brother living after the blow was struck. But we knew the temper of the old man—we could not tell what view the law might take as regards cause and effect. I do not know that even now ; but I am here to answer to my name if any demand be made upon me !”

He threw up his head and looked squarely at them all. Marcia put out her slender hand and laid it gently upon his.

“We will do our utmost—my husband and I—that all shall be forgotten. He has influence ; I have some. I think your work to-night will make it impossible for any person to seek your hurt afterwards.”

The man rose to his feet.

"I must be going," he said briefly. "I've had my breathing space. But I thought I'd like to tell you the whole truth from my own lips, before you saw Marcus again, and in case anything might—happen—to me down there."

He held out his hand, and Marcia placed hers within it. She flushed with pain as his grip closed on her fingers; but she did not wince, nor would she have spared that hand-clasp, and there were tears in her eyes as she saw him go.

"He is willing to die for Marcus," was the thought in her heart.

Another hour—and another wore away. No one came up to report progress. Ennisvale strove to reach the toilers at their work in the heart of the earth; but they had got too far for him. He had not the experience to enable him safely to tread the dark, rough tunnels; nor did he know at what moment the blastings would take place, nor where to bestow himself at such moments so as to avoid the concussion.

Marcia felt stifled; she passed out into the open air, and saw the first faint grey of the coming dawn lightening the south-easterly sky. Far away, at some farmstead, the first cock crew.

Almost at the same moment, as though from the very heart of the earth beneath her feet, an immense smothered clamour arose—cries and shouts—was it cheering also?—as of men who had triumphed. Marcia stood rigid and still, rooted to the spot.

Then Leslie's voice, clear and flute-like, pierced her understanding :

"Something has happened! They have found them! Oh, Marcia! Marcia!—is it living—or dead?"

## CHAPTER XXIX

### UNITED

THE news had run like wild-fire, carried by the swift feet of the boy. There was a rush from the crowd which was waiting about upon the bleak hill-side. They poured through the caverns — these great, brawny sons of toil. They heard that help was wanted to bear their comrades to the upper air, and they almost fought each other for the foremost place, heedless whether there were danger to be faced or no.

In the pale, ghostly glimmer of the coming day, Marcia and Leslie, clinging together, watched the rush go by, guarded by Percival and Ennisvale from any rash step which in their excitement they might have taken. Marcia's tremors were stilled now. Every emotion, every sensation, every faculty seemed absorbed into the one breathless strain of expectancy.

The victims were found. They were being brought up. In a few more moments she would see her husband's face. She waited, her eyes fixed upon the entrance to the first cave. The murmur from within grew and increased in density and

volume. The women grouped about them at respectful distance began to utter strangled sobs.

"They are coming! They are coming!" spoke one and another; and the very air seemed to take up and pass on the thrilling words.

Out they came—the head of that grim procession. The panting bearers held in their clasp two stalwart forms, so locked together that there had been no disentangling them down below. The men staggered beneath the weight of that great burden. Upon the first stretch of short, level grass they laid it down, and a cry escaped Ruth Raleigh's white lips.

"It is my father—my father and the master!"

Marcia was already upon her knees, the men falling back at her approach. Ruth was instantly beside her, and on the other side of the unconscious figures appeared the doctor, together with Tom Drummond, Ennisvale, and Percival.

"The old man had got him in a vice!" spoke the doctor. "It looks as though they had fallen so, and become unconscious. We must get them apart by hook or by crook. It strikes me that in the case of the old man the *rigor mortis* has already set in."

It needed all the strength of three strong men to loosen that vice-like clasp. Old Ebenezer Raleigh had passed away with his arms wound in a terrible constriction round the body of the man upon whom he had vowed vengeance. A single brief examination on the part of the doctor proved that life was here extinct. He turned in a moment to Marcus bent over him, tore apart his clothes, laid his head to

his heart, and listened, whilst a hush greater than would have seemed possible fell upon the assembled crowd.

"It beats!" he said. "Give me brandy instantly."

It was already in Marcia's hands — her own silver flask. The doctor forced some drops through the clenched teeth. He rubbed more upon the lips and temples; he propped up the recumbent figure, with the shoulders a little raised, and worked the arms to and fro as in the case of half-drowned men. Marcia, gazing with her soul in her eyes, saw a faint change in the ashy, livid pallor of the face. Next minute a great sigh was breathed by the unconscious man, and the doctor ceased his efforts.

"That will do," he said. "A little more brandy down his throat, Lady Marcia. Ah! he swallowed it that time. That is well. And now to get to Wold Hall as fast as may be. I am wanted elsewhere, I fear; but I will come at the first possible moment. Take care how you move him. One arm is broken—compound fracture, I fear."

One question Marcia asked of the bystanders, as the stretcher was brought which was to convey her husband home.

"The rest—are they all safe?"

"We have got them all out, my lady—every one."

"Living?"

"Most of them, we think. Two were drowned dead—lying under the water; had slipped down, like enough, worn out with cold or hunger or som'ut. One lad began to speak and tell us things, but the

doctor bid him be quiet a while yet. 'Tis the master and the old man he was most afeard for—lying all in a heap just below the place where the other one said the master must have stood to call out."

"I suspect the old man sprang at him," spoke Percival, in a low tone; "he has long been half-crazed. No doubt the explosion and the imprisonment, and perhaps the injury he had received, completely shattered such senses as remained to him. Fever may have supervened and given him strength. Marcus appears to have had a badly broken arm. If the old man sprang upon him in the dark, he would be powerless to resist him. Probably they pitched and fell together, and so lay; and that is why we could get no reply, none of the men knowing the secret of the communication with the cavern above."

They carried him tenderly back to Wold Hall, whither loving hands had hurried to make all ready for him. Ruth Raleigh, upon learning that her father was dead, had stood up with a white face but steadfast mien, and had commended his remains to the care of some of their own farm hands, who by this time were up and about, and had been drawn to the spot by the prevailing excitement. She herself walked beside Tom Drummond, who swung on ahead to Wold Hall, and it was their strong hands and those of his wife which performed for Marcus the first offices of loving tendance. He was speedily lying soft and warm in his own bed, hot nourishment being administered in small quantities,





and the sadly injured arm wrapped up in wet bandages, waiting till the doctor should have leisure to attend to it.

"A nasty compound fracture," Tom remarked, as he set the limb in the best possible position. "I wonder how he got that? But do not look so white, Lady Marcia."

"Do not call me that, Tom," she said, looking up suddenly into his eyes. "We are cousins, and I owe to you my husband's life."

He touched her hand with his, and smiled. She had not really seen his face clearly before. In the dim dusk of the autumn night, and in the darkness of the cave, or by the glare of the fire, he had looked singularly like a rougher edition of her husband. Now, however, she was able to note many points of distinction. The features and colouring were wonderfully similar; but the expression was very different. That calm, decisive firmness was lacking; the lips were just a little loose; the eyes wavered sometimes in their glance, and did not look so squarely into the face of those he spoke to. A touch of careless recklessness seemed to pervade his words and actions, which differed in essence from the quiet self-containedness and power so characteristic of Marcia. His smile was singularly sweet, as Marcia observed. She could understand the sway that this man had held over Ruth Raleigh.

A shaft of quivering sunlight had fallen across the bed just as Marcus opened his eyes. His wife was bending over him. Their eyes met. It was

as though in that long, long glance the chasm which had sundered them was first bridged, and then drew slowly, slowly together. No word was spoken for a great while. The language of looks was enough. Then Marcia bent her head lower and lower, and pressed her lips upon his. "My husband!" she said, in a low, clear tone that just quivered and thrilled.

"Was it a dream, Marcia?" he asked presently, when she had tended and fed him, and was sitting beside him, holding the uninjured hand—"was it a dream that you spoke to me down in the depths, that I heard the old familiar call—"

He stopped and looked at her, drawing his brows together in a momentary bewilderment. She smiled gently as she answered:

"Tom's call, you mean? No, it was no dream, Marcus. Tom has come back; it was he who showed me first where you were, who told me how I could speak with you, and who taught the men a way of rescue, shorter, surer than the other. It was Tom who led the rescue party, and who brought you out from that dreadful darkness."

"It was not dark after you had spoken to me, Marcia. It was like the light of heaven breaking through. Only afterwards all seemed to slip away, till I woke, to find you beside me."

She lifted his hand and laid her cheek against it. Even now caresses seemed just a little too strange and new between them to be lavishly proffered.

"Yes, a lad has told about that. It was old Ebenezer Raleigh. You had dragged him out of immediate danger, in spite of your broken arm, Marcus, and he had been lying quiet all through those long hours. You kept up their spirits. You gave them your own lozenges to support their strength. You signalled and answered signals, and told them what was being done for their rescue. Oh, we have heard the story now! And then came a curious call. They were frightened—thought it a ghostly summons; but you sprang up, and went along another gallery, and called back. None dared to follow you, save that lad, at a distance. He did not see the old man creep after you; but he must have done so. The boy heard you shout, but your head was hidden, and he could not tell what it was you said. You had lighted the remaining candle to guide you, but the light was burning very dim. Still, it was enough to show him what happened. You were standing upon a ledge of rock, with your head in a sort of hole-like cavity. Ebenezer sprang at you like a panther, clasped you in his arms, and together you fell and rolled, and the candle went out. He crept back to the others and told what he had seen; but to them it was as the tale of one who dreams. Two crept along for a little way to try and find you, but fearing to be lost themselves, they gave it up and returned to their comrades. That is all they can tell till the rescue party forced the way down, and you and the old

man were found lying locked together—he dead, and you just living.”

“Dead! The old man dead? Before he could learn the truth.”

“Perhaps it is better so,” answered Marcia gently; “he will be saved the pain of a lifelong remorse for the desperate deed of darkness he committed. I think his mind was unhinged. We will not think harshly of him. It is not hard to forgive, seeing that I have you back, Marcus.”

He heard the tender quiver of her voice, and caught the fleeting glance of her eyes. His fingers closed over hers with more of strength than she had believed them to possess.

“Marcia,” he said, “when did you begin to love me?”

A lovely blush rose in her ivory-pale face, and slowly faded. Her eyes looked full into his, as she replied:

“I think it must have been when I began to trust you, Marcus.”

“And when was that, my dearest?”

Again she paused, and searched her memory. It was so hard to remember the time when she had not loved this man.

“I think it was when I began to see that others did not quite trust you; when I began to hear whispers. At the first they troubled me. I felt you had a secret in your life, and I was hurt and angry. For a time it divided us. But when I found that others suspected, wondered, whispered,

hinted—oh, then my spirit rose in revolt. I hated them for it. I began to hate myself—”

“Why did you not ask me then, Marcia?”

There was a proud, happy light in her eyes as she answered:

“Because I knew that you would tell me all it was right for me to know. I did not wish to know that which you held back.”

“My faithful, true-hearted wife!”

“You told me I might ask what I would, Marcus; but you did not wish to tell it me. That was enough.”

“I did wish to tell you,” he answered quietly. “But I had a scruple. It had been agreed between us—whether wisely or not I will not judge—that it would be safer if possible to keep the secret of Tom’s existence a secret still; as to reveal it might bring about innumerable complications, and cause search after him to be made. My promise to him was that I would reveal it if my own safety were in peril. Without that pledge he would not have gone.

“I could not reckon upon the action you might take were you to know all. I wanted the memory of the episode to die out. Perhaps it was partly my pride. I had screened Tom for so long, we had played our game with such remarkable success, that I did not want my hand forced. It was my letter to Tom with the story of my marriage which brought him back. It reached him at last, it seems, when I had almost given up expecting it. I trust he has not come back to peril and trouble.”

"I think not," spoke Marcia gently, anxious that Marcus should avoid all excitement; "I can see nothing which would connect him with that night in other people's minds. Probably he may tell the story openly now. Old Ebenezer is dead Ruth and Tom love one another—"

"You have heard the old story, then, from first to last?"

"I think so—a bit here and a bit there, as the long, long night wore away. Oh, Marcus, it is all like some great, strange, terrible dream! You are sure that it is true that I have got you back! I shall not wake to be told that I have been ill, and that you—that you—"

She shuddered from head to foot, and put her hands before her eyes. Her face was almost whiter than his; and his hand moved to the bell which stood close at hand. The sound it made brought Marcia back to a sense of her own weakness. She smiled tremulously as she laid her head for a moment beside her husband's on the pillow, and let the tears run down unchecked.

"I—I—am foolish. I am so sorry, Marcus. I ought to be taking care of you. But these two long days and nights—"

"My dearest, you must go and rest. Ah, here is the doctor; he shall tell you so himself. Come here, Rawson! I want you to see to my wife first of all. She wants more looking after than I do."

The bluff old grey-headed man moved forward

into the room, shutting out for a moment Leslie, who had come with him to the door.

"I'll not be saying that altogether, Marcus," he answered, with the freedom of one who had known his patient from childhood, and had, indeed, brought him into the world; "but maybe her ladyship was telling you what I was telling her the other day, that there's a special reason why she should be careful of herself just now. And if I'd been aware of it last night, she should have been in bed, instead of spending the night in yon uncanny cave, waiting for her man to be brought to her. However, she's young and she's strong, and she's got her husband safe home again; and if she'll be a wise woman, and leave him to us for the next four-and-twenty hours, and spend them in bed, I don't doubt we'll be finding no such great harm done after all. There's no doctor's stuff in the world as will come near happiness to set folks up again."

The crimson flush had again dyed Marcia's cheek; she bent her head so as to hide it in the pillow. She was trembling from head to foot with a curious and ecstatic joy, the mystery of which was instantly communicated to Marcus, who, with a strength altogether unexpected, just raised himself and bent his head to touch with his lips the soft hair about her ear.

"My darling!" he whispered.

The doctor, who had turned his back, now summoned Leslie from without, and almost pushing

Marcia into her arms, exclaimed in authoritative tones :

“ Put her to bed—put her to bed, Miss Moncrieff; and don't let her stir out of it until I have seen her again ! ”



## CHAPTER XXX

### "BEST BELOVED"

MARCUS was moved to Falconer's Hall as soon as it was considered safe for him to make the transit. As he crossed the threshold, he exchanged a look with his wife, and she alone understood the words that trembled upon his lips :

"Our home now, Marcia !" And the light leaped to her eyes, and a flush to her cheeks. She knew his meaning. That which was his had become hers since the day upon which their hands were joined in wedlock. Now he recognised equally that what was hers (by his own gift though it was) would henceforth be his as never before. They were one ; there could be no question between them of mine and thine ; the union of heart and spirit entailed all the rest as its natural *sequitur*.

Tom Drummond was left at Wold Hall, to act as Marcus's substitute at the pits for the time being. Those two years and a half of exile from his country had done more to steady the man than all his previous experiences. He had not passed the time unprofitably. He had seen mining in Western America. He had made money. He had learned

temperance and self-control. In old days he had been much with Marcus in and about the pits, at such times as he could be there unobserved. The work was not new to him, nor were Marcus's methods unfamiliar. The men took to him. His appearance in that strange fashion upon that eventful night, and his successful rescue of the entombed men—who must otherwise inevitably have perished—had given him extraordinary prestige from the first moment. His likeness to the master, his own easy yet commanding ways, his great bodily strength, and the fashion in which he handled their own tools, all told upon the men. They accepted him willingly as his kinsman's substitute. It set Marcus thinking of various plans in which he might combine practical assistance to his cousin with a release from some of his own more pressing duties at the pits. If he were to take up a permanent residence at Falconer's Hall, and with it that position which belonged to the owner of a considerable landed property, he would certainly require more time at his disposal than he had hitherto commanded, and a working partner at the pits might become a virtual necessity.

No one seemed to connect Tom Drummond in any way with the mysteries of Wold Hall in the past. Possibly some suspected now that this might be the explanation of much which had perplexed them in time past. But it was nobody's business to reopen the matter. Old Ebenezer lay in his grave; and his daughter managed the farm for

the little grandson, till he should come of age. Soon it was known that Tom Drummond was courting Ruth Raleigh, and the match gave general satisfaction. The Raleighs had as good blood in their veins as the Drummonds; and it was not everyone who could be as the young master, and marry into the quality. The people liked to feel that there would be Drummonds at Wold Hall still, and that the old connection with the pits would still be maintained. The miners had been roused to bitterness and discontent by the hints and promptings of old Ebenezer and those encouraged or employed by him; but they now knew who was their friend. Marcus became the idol of the hour, and next to him Tom Drummond, who had saved his kinsman's life at the eleventh hour.

Sir Robert and Lady Drummond hastened to Falconer's Hall as soon as they heard of the catastrophe, and arrived there one day before their son; Lord and Lady St. Barbe followed somewhat more deliberately—all anxious to share with Marcia some of her cares and anxieties. But the iron constitution of Marcus threw off the effects of his entombment with wonderful speed; though the badly injured arm, over which the great surgeons were at one time rather disposed to shake their heads, kept him a helpless prisoner for a considerable time.

One leading surgeon advised instant amputation. But Marcus shook his head resolutely. Whatever present suffering he might have to endure, he

would keep his arm if it were possible. Only if it became necessary to amputate to save his life would he consent to the operation.

"You'll find me tougher than you think—and quicker to mend," he told them; and he proved a true prophet. His unflinching fortitude, and the extraordinary buoyancy of his spirit, carried him along, and seemed to defy the physical exhaustion which they had feared. He would look at Marcia with a smile, and say :

"I don't feel the pain when you are with me. I have so much else to think of. This is our real honeymoon, yours and mine. We never took one before; and now we are taking it at home, like a staid old married couple. But that's the way to enjoy it; and nobody molests us here; though I am glad to know that your mother is in the house to look after you when you are not with me."

And Marcia would look at him tenderly, and say :

"I do not want anyone's care but yours, Marcus."

Leslie had left. She had said to Marcia, half laughing, yet with a glint of tears in her eyes :

"My occupation is gone now. You have Marcus to take care of, and your mother and your mother-in-law are taking care of you. There is nothing for me to do!"

Marcia had looked into Leslie's face, and found it paler and thinner than of old. It seemed almost as though the strain of those weary days of waiting

and watching had told more upon her than upon Marcia herself. So Marcia, not guessing at any source of secret trouble, had judged that a change would be for her friend's good, and had not pressed her to stay longer; but had said:

"You must come back to us, dearest, when Marcus is stronger, and we can begin to think of a little merry-making. Will you be our guest for Christmas, if you have made no other promise?"

Then Leslie's face had brightened; for it was just November now, and Christmas did not loom so very far ahead. She promised, and flitted off to one of those houses where she had been in request through the autumn, and wrote droll and graphic letters to Marcia from thence, which gave no hint of heartache or suspense.

Yet it was Marcus who guessed at a certain thing, and spoke of it smilingly with his wife. Marcia listened with dilated eyes.

"Leslie — Percival Eastlake!" she exclaimed. "What makes you think it, Marcus?"

"I used to see it in his face each time they met; I hear it in his voice when he speaks of her now. I wish indeed it might be. He has lived too long as a recluse. It is good neither for him nor for the child. His health is re-establishing itself slowly; and with returning health that old morbid sense of being cut off from his fellows should pass away. He has taken to his pen again. He has considerable literary gifts. He was beginning to make himself known as a writer before this catastrophe fell upon

him. He has means ; he has brains ; all he wants is someone to love him and to love, and to make a home for him and Sweetheart ; and he would be the happiest man in creation—save one !”

And as he spoke the last two words, Marcus's strong right hand shot out and gripped the fingers of his wife.

The ready flush mantled her cheek at the significant gesture. Marcus had a hundred characteristic ways of making love without the exact use of honeyed phrases. His words were always few and restrained. But something in the glance of his eye, in the touch of his hand, in the absolute contentment of his aspect, spoke eloquent music in her ears. Freedom of speech was establishing itself with a rapidity which astonished them both. Each was possessed of a nature singularly reserved and self-contained. The habit of confidence with others had never been made by either. Now they were finding the inexplicable, mysterious charm of putting unrestrained confidences in each other.

“Leslie is coming back at Christmas,” Marcia said. “She has no exact home—though a little place of her own in London. There was something in her look the last days that I did not quite understand. I wonder—I wonder ! Leslie does not wear her heart upon her sleeve, though she seems so gay and frank. Once I fancied that she and Percival were not congenial—that there was something antagonistic—”

"Percival had to keep a tight rein upon himself, I believe," answered Marcus. "For one thing, he doubted whether he ever ought to marry—a doubt which his restored health reduces almost to a shadow; for another, he believed that Leslie and Ennisvale were as good as engaged—"

"But that is not so," spoke Marcia. "I think it will never be now. They have always been very fond of each other; but even Ennisvale—who was rather sentimental for a spell—begins to see that it is not real love. Our parents would have liked it; but a man does not marry to please his parents—"

Then Marcia suddenly stopped short. She looked at her husband, and a little ripple of laughter—the laughter of pure happiness—broke from her lips.

His eyes caught the light from hers. Again the strong fingers clasped those held out to meet them.

"You mean that to marry to please the parents is the prerogative of daughters?"

"They might do worse," answered Marcia, a thrill in her voice. "But then they must be quite, quite sure that the parents have chosen the right man. And such men are not to be picked up every day."

Hand clasped hand, and Marcia cried out joyfully:

"You are getting so strong, Marcus. Your clasp almost hurts. No, no, clasp hard—hurt me.

It is such sweet pain. If only the other hand could press as hard!"

"That will come in time," spoke Marcus, with confidence. "I am not going to be a crippled nuisance, even for the luxury of being waited on by such a wife as mine!"

They sat in blissful silence a while, and then Marcia asked:

"Have the experts ever discovered the cause of the explosion, Marcus? What does Tom—what do they all think about it?"

"The experts are puzzled—can find nothing to account for it. I have always made a point of doing everything to minimise risk in the workings, and the men have been well drilled to make use of the appliances provided. I myself agree with Tom, and a few who are behind the scenes. The explosion was due to preconcerted action. It was directed against me, and others had to be victimised also. The first attempt failed in its object. Then the old man went down himself, and risked—in fact lost—his own life in his determination to take mine. He succeeded marvellously well. Another hour, and help would have come too late. That is why I feel we cannot do too much for Tom. I should be a rich man, Marcia, if I were to give up the pits to-morrow. I do not want to do that. But I want to make Tom a partner, with a third of the profits. My father approves it. He has heard all the tale now, and though much astonished and somewhat outraged



at the first, has condoned all in the realisation of what we owe to Tom. Do you object?"

She smiled. The question seemed to want no other answer; and so the destiny of Tom Drummond was from henceforth settled.

Christmas came, and Leslie with it—a brilliant, bright-eyed Leslie, perhaps a shade too ethereal-looking, as though the rough winds of the northern winter might blow her away, but full of gay sparkle and sunny laughter, ready to be the life and soul of the party, and enthusiastic over the wonderful progress made by Marcus, who was going about as usual, and bore no outward trace of the accident save the slung left arm, which was still unfit for any but the lightest tasks.

Ennisvale, Percival Eastlake, and Sweetheart completed the party. The parents of the young married couple had betaken themselves elsewhere, when fully assured of Marcus's convalescence, and that husband and wife were equal to the care of each other.

"Marcia, you look — glorified!" was Leslie's greeting to her hostess when she was taken to her room at night after the first gay evening had worn itself away. "That is the only word which expresses it. The ivory image has come to life to some purpose. You beautiful Galatea! I wonder what your husband thinks of you?"

"Ask him," quoth Marcia, with a little ripple of laughter in her voice. "My man of bronze has found his tongue at last!"

"A tongue of silver — a voice of gold!" cried Leslie; "but a man of bronze and iron for all that. Not of marble, mind you. Metal can heat, and glow and flash, and grow molten, and kindle a blaze about it. That is what your man of bronze has done. Did I not judge him well from the first?"

"You did. We often talk of that, and of you." Leslie smiled as she noted the use of "we." It fell so constantly and unconsciously from Marcia's lips. "I hope you will judge as well as that for yourself, Leslie."

Her face was rosy as she turned it towards the fire, as though to hide the glow; but she threw warm arms round Marcia's neck as they bade adieu for the night, and whispered:

"It was good of you to have me. I am so happy here—so happy!"

Christmas Eve was devoted to Sweetheart's entertainment. A wonderful Christmas tree was followed by games and romps, in which they all joined, and then an entrancing game of hide-and-seek, in which Ennisvale and Sweetheart challenged the rest of the company, and hid themselves so successfully that it promised to be another case of the mistletoe bough, save that the booming of the dressing-gong brought the triumphant hiders forth again, this being the signal that the searchers gave up the task.

Sweetheart was to sit up for dinner that night, and was placed beside Ennisvale, Leslie and

Percival being opposite, and Marcus and Marcia *vis-à-vis* at the head and foot of the table.

When the customary healths had been drunk, Ennisvale rose to his feet and proposed: "My future wife!" whereupon Sweetheart broke into a gurgling, childish laugh of glee, and Ennisvale gravely explained to the company that Sweetheart had betrothed herself to him that afternoon, and that they were to wait till she had grown up, and then make a match of it.

When they rose from table, all moving together that evening, Ennisvale tossed the child upon his shoulder, carried her round to say good-night, and then prepared to mount the stairs with her to hand over to Marcia's maid, who acted as nurse.

Percival accompanied her to the foot of the stairs, and Leslie stood below in the hall to blow her a kiss. Marcus and Marcia had remained together in the drawing-room, the door being shut.

As Ennisvale reached the gallery above, the child craned over his shoulder, and suddenly asked:

"Best Beloved, what will you do when my Knight comes and marries me, and carries me away on his big white horse?" Then with a sudden inspiration she checked Ennisvale a moment, and cried out with yet more eagerness: "You might ask Pretty Mamma if she would come and stay with you when I'm gone!"

Ennisvale bore the child away rapidly. Percival suddenly turned round, and found himself holding out his hand to Leslie.

"Must I wait for that?" he asked, in a voice low with repressed feeling, as he came towards her.

Her face was quivering between laughter and tears. Suddenly, with a little rush, she was in his arms. Her face was lifted to his.

"Best Beloved!" she whispered; and their lips met.

**THE END**



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